

Surviving Information Overload

We've all been there. It's your first week on a new job and as the paperwork and emails just keep mounting – and you perhaps, you think to yourself, that it's time you got organized. But how? You set up systems to deal with it as you go, and if you're lucky maybe you pick things up from a colleague who seems to be managing OK.

But soon things start to spiral out of control. You lose documents and spend ages looking for them, your email inbox keeps bleeping at you and you seem to expend whatever little time you have on endless meetings. You feel stressed, you work longer and longer hours and somehow you still can't get to completing that important project your manager wants by the end of the week.

Information Overload

According to a Wall Street Journal Survey the average office worker spends 6 weeks per year looking for information they already have. And it's getting worse. A study still in progress by Swinburne University in Melbourne found that the amount of emails we receive doubles every 12 months.

Never Taught How To Work

According to Tony D'Arcy, Managing Director of PEP Worldwide, the problem is that most people have never really been taught how to work. "Most people have just never been shown the basics. How do I evaluate the information that comes across my desk, both paper and electronic, and what are the principles in processing this data?"

In the 23 years PEP Worldwide has been operating, they have coached over a million executives and shattered many myths. "Time management is a misnomer because you can't manage time, you can only manage yourself," says D'Arcy. "We all get the same amount of time; it's what we do with it that's the key."

D'Arcy's top tips for dealing with information overload?

- *Coach Your Staff*

A survey done by Manchester Consulting in 2002 and IPMA Labs in 2000 showed that training alone brings a 22% increase in productivity in the workplace. According to PEP Worldwide's post-course surveys, training combined with coaching, however, brings a staggering 45 to 50% increase in productivity. Clearly a quick-fix time management course is not the key. For lasting results managers need to get themselves organised so that they can then devote time to coach their staff in efficient work habits, or bring in experts who specialise in this.

- *Keep Only What You Need*

Get pruning. Most people ask themselves "Is it possible that at some point in the future I might need this?" That's the wrong question - it's always possible! Try asking yourself "Do I actually use this? If I got rid of it and found I needed it, could I easily get another copy?"

- *A Place for Everything*
People have paper everywhere because they haven't created a place for it, so make a space for the documents you use day to day. Choose somewhere close to your desk like the hanging files in your deep drawer so that putting documents away after you have used them is quick and easy.
- *Get Organised*
Break your job down into its essential elements and construct a filing structure which reflects these. You may need files for more abstract concepts such as planning or brainstorming certain projects. Make sure you have somewhere to put that bright idea when you scribble it down so it doesn't get lost.

Banish Multiple Handling

Resolve either to deal with an email immediately, or put it into a system which flags it to be dealt with at a specified future date or time. If you leave it in your inbox or print it out and put it on your desk, you will only end up re-reading it whenever it catches your eye. These kinds of distractions constantly divert your attention, making you less productive and less focused on the work at hand.

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Employee burnout can spell trouble for your bottom-line

According to a study done in the UK, 48 per cent of respondents had reported increased individual workload against the backdrop of today's global recession. The study, conducted by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and KPMG, also showed that stress levels had risen among workers who had survived the axe. Because of a leaner headcount, employees are expected to work harder and perhaps, even clock longer hours.

Such circumstances, combined with other stress-inducing factors, govern the occurrence of employee burnout. And like any high-powered machine, highly stressed staff can quickly lose steam and break down when put under constant pressure.

Caution – burnout ahead

General feelings of malaise at work can stem from a host of reasons – monotonous routines, heavy workload, office politics, and dissatisfaction with management. However, while these issues are often written off as part and parcel of working life, they do impact employee productivity.

A chief cause of burnout is poor leadership and its danger lies in its influence over other factors. Irresolute leadership effects confusion where managing expectations are concerned. Vague job descriptions and unclear expectations can initiate feelings of insecurity among employees about how their work and worth is measured. And when an individual's unrealistic expectations about the organisation jars with actual organisational experience, it can produce a "reality shock".

Leadership that lacks awareness in preventing and spotting such situations often aggravates employees' growing discontent. Employees will feel increasingly unappreciated of their efforts, uncertain in their positions, and disappointed with management. Additionally, employees who feel they are constantly being policed and unable to exercise personal control over their daily tasks can fall victims to burnout.

And in jobs and industries with high “crunch times” – where staff are required to work longer hours and handle more intensive workload – employees would become easy victims of burnout if there is little “down time” and their extra efforts go unrecognised and uncompensated. Coalesced with lack of communication between staff and their leaders, staff will grapple with work stress while companies face dwindling employee engagement.

Burnout is hazardous to organisational health

Organisations are never perfect; job burnout is inevitable for some. What is more critical is employers understand the serious bearing of workplace stress and burnout.

With stressed and burned out employees, productivity dies a long and painful death. The signs may emerge subtly, such as employee withdrawal – late arrivals at work, long breaks and early departures. Employees generally stay away from the office as much as possible and the frequency and length of absence would only lengthen with time. And even if they are sitting at their desks, the quality, if not quantity, of their performance will diminish. Managers who become burnout victims are especially harmful to organisations because such managers create a ripple effect, spreading burnout to their subordinates and coworkers.

Burned out employees would also lapse into general lethargy and apathy and show little enthusiasm at work. Work relationships become more strained as they develop short tempers and grow more impatient with their colleagues. Highly- stressed and burned out employees are more prone to falling ill, insomnia, and more drastically, depression.

Maintenance required

There are several things employers can do to prevent staff from falling into the burnout trap and continuously keep staff motivated and engaged.

Communicate. Through steady and constant dialogue between managers and staff, expectations are better managed and feedback is solicited. Managers are also able to identify career growth opportunities and recognise employees' work and contribution.

Employee training and development. Besides disrupting the monotony of daily schedules at work, employee training programmes assure staff of professional and career growth plans that the organisation has in store for them. Companies can provide training on areas that will interest staff while improving and enhancing their performance. Motivated employees will put their training to good use.

Reward and recognise. Extensive reward and recognition programmes are not always needed to show appreciation for employees' effort. Simple gestures such as sending a simple thank- you note, a small gift or treating staff to a meal goes a long way letting them know how valuable their contributions are.

Most employees seek a certain level of challenge that keeps them motivated at work. However, feeling overwhelmed by unattainable goals, constant scrutiny and the pressure to perform can chip away at their confidence and feeling of control. Thus it is imperative that employers prevent and recognise the signs of burnout to preserve the health of the company and well-being of its staff.

Having made Singapore my home for the last eleven years and working in many other countries during this period I am fascinated by the ways that different people from different countries communicate and work together. Singapore is one of the most multi-cultural countries I have experienced. I ran a management development workshop recently for a large global MNC and of the twenty one participants eleven nationalities and cultures were represented. While I enjoy and welcome cultural diversity it is important to understand how the different cultures may see each other and to be aware of the “cultural minefield” that may exist within a large organization.

The research of Geert Hofstede in the international management area has led to greater insights into how different cultures see and understand each other. Hofstede discusses four dimensions in understanding organizational management practices: 1. Individualism-collectivism, 2. power distance, 3. uncertainty avoidance, and 4. masculinity versus femininity.

Individualism-collectivism. This dimension centres on organisational practices in individualistic cultures such as Canada, US, Australia, and Great Britain contrasted with collectivistic cultures in East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore). Power distance. Low power distance (Canada, US) subscribes to equal power distribution versus high power distance (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, etc.) in hierarchical structures. Uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede found that Canada and the US are low in uncertainty avoidance, i.e., they like to take risks, take individual initiative, and enjoy conflict. Whereas cultures like Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea are high in uncertainty avoidance, i.e., do not like conflict, but pursue group harmony; people within these organizations need clear rules, procedures, and clearly defined job responsibilities. Masculinity versus femininity. Hofstede discovered that Japan rated high on masculine dimensions (males expect an "incharge" role). In contrast, countries like Norway and Sweden have a stronger feminine dimension, which means that roles are more fluid between males and females.

Professor Ting-Toomey and her colleagues, Michael Bond, Harry Triandis, and Geert Hofstede consistently found that the individualistic and collectivistic dimension teaches the most about differences between cultures, particularly between East Asian and western cultures. Individualism and collectivism is connected with the concept of identity, i.e., How do we see our sense of self? Individualistic cultures emphasize the "I" identity and collectivistic cultures emphasize the "we" identity, which is a fundamental difference between western and eastern cultures. In individualistic cultures, people tend to be verbally direct: they value communication openness, learn to self-disclose, like to be clear, straightforward, and contribute to a positive management climate. Whereas in collectivistic group-oriented cultures, indirect communication is preferred because the image of group harmony is essential. In western cultures, talking is very therapeutic; in Asian cultures, there is an emphasis on observing and reflecting about the process. Research indicates that several patterns of cultural differences exist

Different Communication Styles. The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases

are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of "yes" varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so," with many shades in between.

Different Attitudes Toward Conflict. Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly.

Different Approaches to Completing Tasks. From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks.

Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task.

Different Decision-Making Styles. The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated - - that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself.

Different Attitudes Toward Disclosure. In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are working with others.

Though cultural differences and boundaries do exist, it is my experience that the tie of our common humanity binds us together far greater than the divide of our cultural backgrounds.

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