

Warning: information overload hurts productivity

Web event focuses on time wasted by workers overwhelmed by data deluge

BY ROBERTO ROCHA, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 13, 2009

By one estimate, information overload costs workers eight hours a week of productivity. But on the first ever Information Overload Awareness Day, the toll was half an hour.

In an almost poetic twist of irony, the Web conference for yesterday's event was overloaded with users and delayed while the technical team tried to accommodate everyone.

Basex, the research firm that organized the event would call this an "unnecessary interruption," which, it claims, spread across the U.S. economy, sucks 28 per cent of the knowledge worker's day and costs the U.S. economy \$900 billion a year in lost productivity.

Information overload, the New York-based firm says, is precisely that: the constant disruption of the work day with irrelevant material, including emails, meetings, automated news feeds and Twitter.

Though the figures calculated by Basex have been contested as deceptive and inflated - Craig Roth of the Burton Group says not all distractions are harmful interruptions - there's no denying that companies and workers are overwhelmed with information.

"People aren't shutting off. They go to sleep thinking about what they have to do, and they wake up thinking about what they have to do," said Christina Randle, a speaker at the event and CEO of The Effective Edge, a maker of productivity software.

In other words, there's a reason why Webster's New World College Dictionary declared "crackberry" the word of the year in 2006.

The speakers agreed that information overload deprives workers of much-needed "think time," where knowledge is absorbed and digested, and new ideas are conceived.

Basex has numbers for that, too: disruptions leave workers with only 12 per cent of the day for thought and reflection, "even though knowledge workers think for a living," said Jonathan Spira, senior analyst at Basex.

For Spira, the reason workers interrupt each other is a matter of sociological significance. For one, he senses that everyone thinks everything they do is urgent. "There's a need for instant gratification," he said. "People have no qualms about interrupting what others are doing."

This translates into unreasonable expectations of response time, where an email that goes unanswered for two minutes is followed by another one asking if the first one was received.

But while it's easy to blame co-workers for the distraction, people need to look within and back in time, said Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*.

People overload themselves with information by thinking that multitasking is an efficient way to work, when, in fact, it decreases one's attention for either task.

"You're only getting a certain type of efficiency when switching tasks every three minutes," she said. "And when people feel scattered they have lowered creativity. Stress and frustration are correlated with a highly interrupted workplace."

Jackson traced multitasking back to theories of efficiency from the Industrial Revolution, namely the idea of chopping work into manageable pieces.

But this hasn't worked for the Information Age.

She said companies need to train their workers to improve attention skills and active listening. This will take a huge cultural shift in which we "question our old value system," she said.

"Our idea of a successful person is someone who's so hurried and wedded to their mobile gadget that he half listens to those around him," she said. "This is a poor role model."

There are also tools to manage the flow of information, software that sorts email by relevance and makes people think before sending a pointless message.

A Canadian startup company, PostRank, tries to filter the daily glut of news and blog posts into a small list.

And some companies are experimenting with daily "quiet times" or "zero email days" with mixed results, said Nathan Zeldes, president of The Information Overload Research Group.

But any attempt to rein in overload, he emphasized, has to start at the top with a deep understanding of its causes and effects.

"Managers are aware of the problem, but they rarely understand the impact," he said. "It takes leadership and courage to make changes, but it's well worth the effort. It gives employees back their sanity."

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