

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?"

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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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