

## Process Improvement for Knowledge Workers

*by Ira Chaleff*

Identifying and developing key behaviours and systems enables today's knowledge workers to maximize their efforts both on an individual and organizational level.

As technology races ahead, those working in the high-technology field know that whatever else is occurring one thing is predictable: the workload will never let up.

Senior management exhort teams to meet tight development schedules while holding the headcount steady and relying ever increasingly on contractors. Team processes themselves increase the hours spent in meetings. Advances in telecommunications and groupware produce dramatic increases in the volume of information received and the expectations for rapidity of response time. Mobile phones, laptops, tablets and modems ensure that all the potential "breathing spaces" in a day are filled with work. And, in most companies, despite a networked PC on every desk, the information doesn't stop coming—vendor information, training and demo announcements, professional journals, regulatory forms, contracts, license renewals, benefits changes, documentation, reports, and courier packages.

The effects of this information deluge is that the typical manager or professional:

- Works nearly 10 hours a week longer than a decade ago.
- Retains 35 hours of backlogged work at his or her workstation
- Is often stretched too thin to pay more than lip service to improving internal customer service.

As organisations struggle to find ways to make Six Sigma or Kaizen more than a bygone buzzword and to reengineer their processes to maximize the potential pay-off from technological advances, they often overlook an underlying obstacle. To the personnel in the trenches, an effort to improve processes frequently is perceived as one more addition to a workload that is already highly stressful. This situation only worsens when these same individuals are promoted to project leaders or managers. Who prepares them to cope? Who gives them the skills to bail themselves out when they start drowning in the e-mail, voice mail and social networking?

It stands to reason that if an individual's own work processes are poorly designed and inefficient, his or her ability to contribute to the improvement of team work processes will be severely impaired. Yet a survey of white collar workers found that more than half of the respondents were poorly organized and too overloaded to focus on business process

improvement. This finding has tremendous impact when you consider how much money and energy is being spent to create a continuous improvement culture.

The key to the problem lies in the nature of managerial or knowledge work. You can't fully convert it to a routine like you can a manufacturing process.

The Centre for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina reports that a manager typically performs 125 to 150 different activities during a day. The fact that these activities cannot be turned into a routine appears to justify a lack of effort to organize this vital work efficiently.

What are the tools of the trade for a knowledge worker and what are the barriers to teaching and using them?

## Behaviours

In the Information Age, certain key behaviours must be developed, or the sheer volume of work to be done in most contemporary jobs will overwhelm whatever personal systems are established to manage the work.

**Screening**—The first critical behaviour is front-end screening of nonessential information. Determining what you don't need to know is every bit as important as determining what you do need to know.

Knowledge workers must remove themselves from mailing lists whose publications are of marginal value, and from report distribution lists if they never use the reports. They must ruthlessly filter out the interesting, but nonessential, so it doesn't bog them down.

**Procrastination**—By the very nature of their functions, knowledge workers, unlike assembly-line workers or customer service personnel, can pick and choose what they will focus on during the day. And, there are dozens of legitimate choices.

It is human nature; however, to procrastinate about those aspects of a job we like least or feel unsure about. Typically, there are always a few tasks around that fit this description. Therefore, knowledge workers are particularly prone to procrastination and the stress it causes.

When dealing with scores or hundreds of discretionary items daily, it becomes critical to adopt an anti-procrastination or handle-it-the-first-time-you-encounter-it approach. Otherwise, knowledge workers pick up and put down the same piece of work many times before acting on it, a practice that adds no value and drains creative energy.

**Interruptions**—Another Centre for Creative Leadership study shows that the average mid-level manager is interrupted every 5 to 20 minutes. Yet, knowledge work requires concentration to accomplish the major responsibilities of the job—research, analysis, writing innovation, design and communication.

In our experience, interruptions can be reduced dramatically if individuals and teams adopt a handful of modifications to their work processes. Some bosses still think they have the God-

given right to interrupt anyone who works for them whenever a thought crosses their minds—"Joe, come up to see me now, would you?" These managers should begin batching communications to the individuals with whom they interact most frequently.

Reducing internal interruptions markedly improves concentration and, with it, quantity and quality of knowledge work output.

## Systems

Good work behaviours must be supported by good work systems at the individual level, as well as at the organizational level. Knowledge workers must be given models of personal work organization to which they can compare their own practices. Then they must improve their existing practices by tailoring these models energetically to their own job requirements and work styles.

**Manual Systems**—We all know a few people whose offices are entirely overwhelmed by email and paper, but most of us struggle to keep up with our communication. Imagine trying to run an efficient factory with hundreds of parts randomly scattered around the shop. Yet this is how email and paper are often treated in a knowledge work environment.

Knowledge workers need to understand a few key principles for organizing information, and need to apply these principles when designing their personal systems:

- Group-contain-label
- Clutter-free work surfaces
- Frequency of use

**Electronic Systems**—It is not uncommon for knowledge workers to receive 100 or more e-mail messages a day and to have hundreds if not thousands of messages in their electronic inboxes. Once again, knowledge workers are left to their own devices to figure out how to organize themselves to use this wonderful electronic tool.

Setting up screens, rules or filters can eliminate the chaff. But even with filters, the volume of mail often will be heavy, which is why the handle-it-once behaviour is critical. Act on and delete as many messages as possible immediately after you read them.

For messages that must be saved, apply the group-contain label principle. Set up "folders" for your key projects and responsibilities, and save to those. This process facilitates both the review and retrieval of messages.

Some word processing software still use folder naming conventions that make it difficult to label folders clearly. Once again, the group-contain-label principle is key. Create directories and subdirectories for major projects and functions. This action limits the number of folders you need to scan for retrieval, and makes it easier to assign systematic and intelligible labels.

Then the frequency-of-use principle applies. Periodically transfer folders that haven't been used since a defined cut-off date on work area drives on your hard disk to an archival system. This tactic, again, speeds up the retrieval process for most files you will access.

## Maintaining Balance

If you still live in two worlds—electronic and paper—our structures for storing and retrieving information, and processing work, should parallel each other. When knowledge workers begin thinking in these terms they find it easier to develop personal systems to control information and their jobs.

Major work must be scheduled. Too often, individuals use their calendars only to schedule meetings with one another. But we also should schedule appointments with ourselves. These are often the most important appointments we have; often our only chance to focus on our own priorities.

If knowledge workers fail to block out time for observing, analysing, reflecting, planning and writing—all of which are so central to their jobs—they simply give away that time to a thousand small interruptions. That is why it is crucial to strike a balance between fast-paced interaction and focused concentration, between "help desk" service activities and new product development projects.

It is fortunate that we have found most knowledge workers to be open to change. Equally fortunate, we have found that once managers are assisted in such a change process, they make excellent coaches who later can help their staffs develop the behaviours and systems they need to excel.

And no organisation striving for world class status, quality performance and improved profitability can afford not to help its knowledge workers excel.

If you want to know more about what we can do to help you change forever the way that you work then please contact us via our website  
<http://www.pepworldwide.com.au/index.cfm>.

© PEPworldwide Pty Ltd 2011

