

## Enough already: information overload

Sydney Morning Herald: 22 October 2010

Written by James Adonis, author of 'Corporate Punishment: Smashing the management clichés for leaders in a new world'.



A never-ending avalanche of information is causing headaches across the country.

Get a load of this. A survey released this week revealed the latest affliction to hit white-collar workers. It's called 'information rage', and almost one in two Aussie employees is affected by it. Overwhelmed by the torrent of data flooding corporate workplaces, many are on the verge of breaking point.

Conducted by LexisNexis, the survey of 1,700 people identified dejection and frustration as prominent emotions among 49 per cent of respondents, who admitted they're unable to manage all the information coming their way. Of those, 51 per cent said they're close to giving up.

The researchers calculated that the average Australian employee spends less than two-and-a-half days per week actually doing their job. The rest of the time is spent navigating a virtual forest of information. What's more, only about half of that information is relevant to getting the job done.

Take emails, for example. Out of the five countries polled (the others being China, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States), Australian professionals were the most likely to say that most of the emails they receive are unimportant and inconsequential.

Only 40 per cent of emails are deemed to be of value. The others are a waste of time. A classic offender is the old "cc". This is when people get copied into a never-ending thread of electronic notifications, with very few of these pertinent to the work of the recipients.

The aftermath of all this is the deterioration in quality that occurs when flustered employees – unable to sort through a pile of information fast enough – end up submitting work that is substandard. Almost three quarters of the survey's respondents declared their work has suffered as a result.

The researchers reckon information rage is propelled by three factors. The first is "a surfeit of information". Managers worry they're not providing enough data, and so they inundate employees with a lot to be on the safe side.

The second is "the lack of relevance." Perhaps because their time is limited, managers pass on whatever they get and hope their employees take care of the filtering. And the third is "the inability of organisational systems to deal with the information well," which indicates that storing all the knowledge and making it easy to access is a struggle.

We can't blame the internet for it all. Whilst it's undoubtedly exacerbating the issue, information overload has been around for decades. It's just that today it's instantaneous. With transmission of data from one person to another so effortless, we're oblivious to the potential anxiety of the person who may not need (or care about) the information we're conveying.

Contrary to the theory of too much information is a contrary theory dubbed 'organisation underload'. Proponents of this philosophy suggest it's not an abundance of information that's the problem; what's really causing the angst is our inability to deal with it.

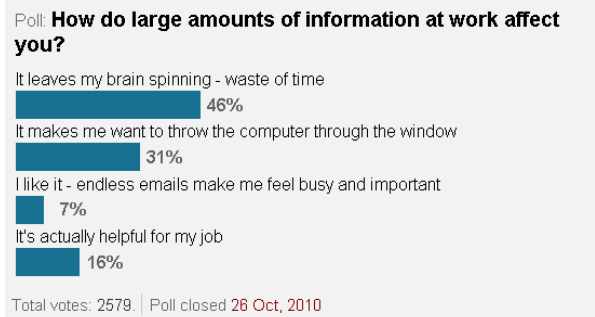
The survey released this week, for instance, showed that only one fifth of Australian employees have received training on how to handle the mass of information at work, despite 60 per cent saying they require it.

Regardless, people are swamped, and Xerox put this [entertaining video](#) together last year to shed some light on what they call IOS – Information Overload Syndrome. The narrator declares the amount of information shared in the business world is increasing by 30 per cent a year.

And it's not just emails. It's phone calls, presentations, attachments, memos, instant messages, paperwork, newsletters, social media, and so on. It's a barrage of information dressed up as communication, with people confusing more communication with successful communication, thinking the former always leads to the latter. It doesn't.

A good portion of information overload is self-driven. Research conducted by the University of London a few years ago unearthed a concept known as 'infomania', which is when people are addicted to emailing and texting, with the study showing it could lower a person's IQ by twice as much as smoking marijuana. So, basically, smart phones are turning us into dumb drones.

The Information Age has morphed into an information rage against the machine. The data-loving corporate machine. Will it ever slow down?



**Disclaimer:** These polls are not scientific and reflect the opinion only of visitors who have chosen to participate.