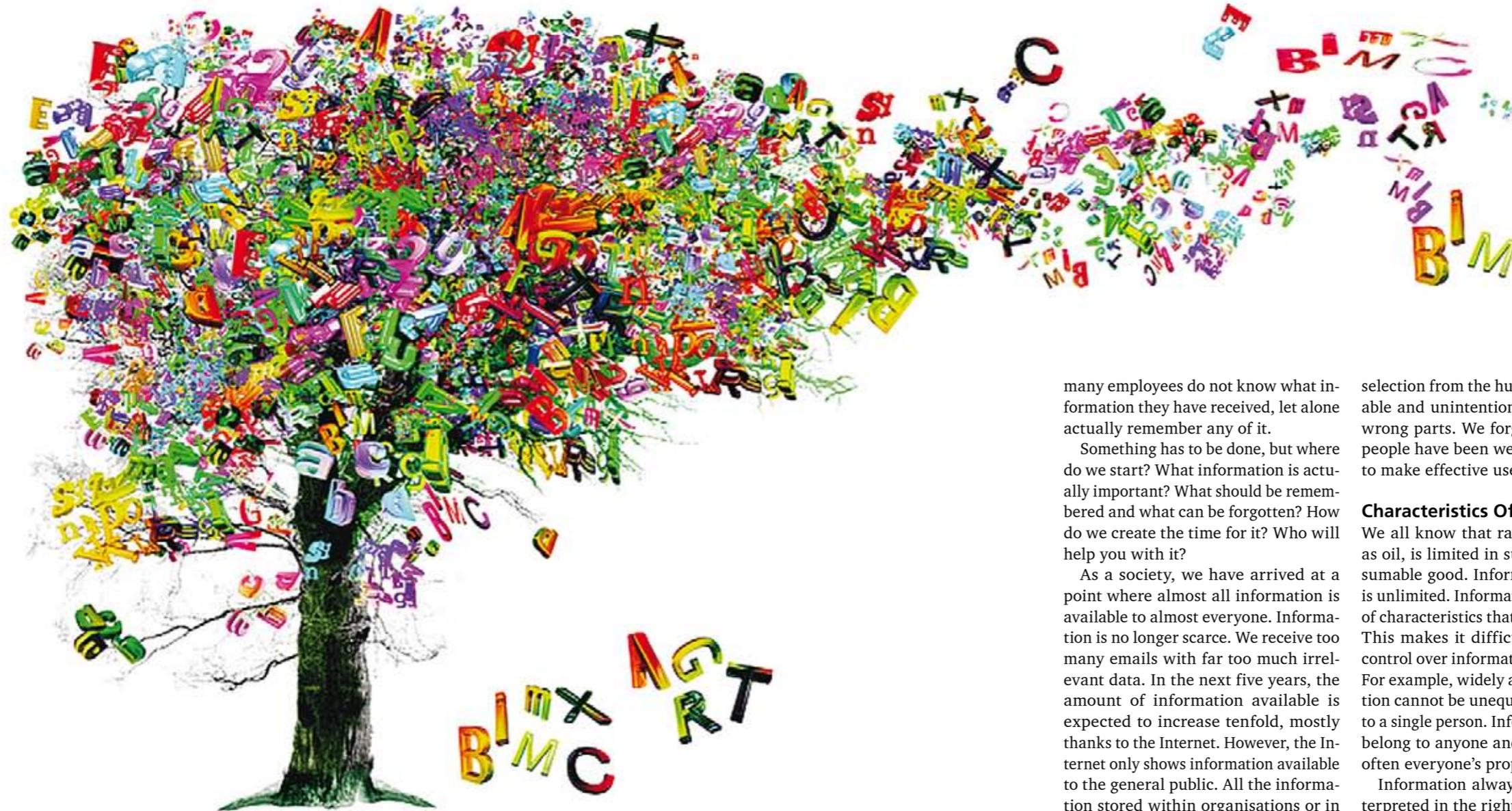


Surviving Information Overload



Information Management

WHEREVER or whenever you may work, the problem is more and more becoming a matter of choice: what particular information will get your attention and when? Email, people, paper, your thoughts? Will you finally deal with that to-do list or will you be swayed by more immediate issues? By the end of the day,

private homes is not accessible to the public yet. Never mind the information that people have stored in their own digital memory - their brain.

Many people feel overloaded with information. The sheer amount of it makes some people nervous and tense. They experience a strong loss of concentration; a high level of stress; and feelings of guilt because they have so much still to read. People start to miss important information; they make a

to extract accurate knowledge from it. Many items in the newspaper or statements from top managers lack this context. The more the information is aggregated or simplified, the more the original context will disappear. Second, third or even more distant hand information is also less reliable, precisely due to the leaving out or adding of personal context by the provider. In addition, the cultural context of the message is important. Not only lan-

Dr. Guus Pijpers
(Associate Professor - Information Behaviour, TiasNimbas Business School; and MD of Acuerdis) expresses that good information skills will soon be the only distinguishing feature of a person and of an entire organisation

many employees do not know what information they have received, let alone actually remember any of it.

Something has to be done, but where do we start? What information is actually important? What should be remembered and what can be forgotten? How do we create the time for it? Who will help you with it?

As a society, we have arrived at a point where almost all information is available to almost everyone. Information is no longer scarce. We receive too many emails with far too much irrelevant data. In the next five years, the amount of information available is expected to increase tenfold, mostly thanks to the Internet. However, the Internet only shows information available to the general public. All the information stored within organisations or in

selection from the huge quantity available and unintentionally pick out the wrong parts. We forget that very few people have been well-trained in how to make effective use of information.

Characteristics Of Information

We all know that raw material, such as oil, is limited in supply; it is a consumable good. Information, however, is unlimited. Information has a number of characteristics that are truly unique. This makes it difficult to have close control over information as a resource. For example, widely available information cannot be unequivocally awarded to a single person. Information does not belong to anyone and consequently is often everyone's property.

Information always needs to be interpreted in the right context in order

guage, but also customs, feelings and even the nature of a relationship can influence the exchanged message. Only a human being can rule out certain ambiguities from a message.

Information is a resource that will never be exhausted. It will not disappear when you pass it on to others. Information can be reused or even reapplied for a new purpose. Digital information can also be altered quickly. The original information may even have got lost somewhere.

People prefer information that suits their current frame of reference. They attribute a higher value to that information. When you pass on information to someone else, however, you can never be certain that the other person has fully understood that information. Sometimes it is clear; often we only

think it is clear. By asking questions and giving feedback, we are moving in the right direction. However, it is never certain that even a term such as ‘interest rate’ means the same to both parties. As Alan Greenspan aptly put it, ‘I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant.’

When assessing the value of information, a number of factors also play a part. For example, it is not easy to exclude people from the advantages of using information, simply because search engines are very democratic. Information products are often priced based on the expected or perceived consumer value, not based on the cost-plus pricing approach. Information is expensive to produce, but cheap to reproduce. Furthermore, we do not need to possess the information ourselves. As Aristotle had once said: ‘On the whole, you find wealth much more in use than in ownership.’

We Humans

Information plays an important part in our society. A number of human characteristics apply here. As human beings, we are addicted to information. We often feel a sense of achievement when we learn something new and can satisfy our inherent curiosity. Technology is increasingly helping us improve in our quest for information.

We humans also have a strange habit of, on the one hand wanting to receive as little information as possible, just the bare necessities, and, on the other hand, loving to bore our fellow man with all we know or think we need to say. As a consequence, some people cut themselves off from information.

We store an immense amount of information, purely for the sake of storing it, or for sharing it with others. We are continuously sculpting our past based on all kinds of historical data because in the present we determine how we look at the past. Today, it is no longer possible to absorb all the knowledge there is on a certain subject. Life is

simply too short to achieve that.

Humans like to talk to other humans. Those who know us give us information that they know suits our needs. Yet the law of diminishing marginal returns applies here too: information is only interesting and useful up to a certain point, after which additional information is no longer relevant and may even be unwanted or harmful.

Literacy Skills

On a daily basis, we have to select, filter and process large amounts of information from a wide variety of sources. Then we have to determine the accuracy and reliability of the information, although this often happens implicitly. A reputable newspaper or respected colleague leaves little room for doubt, but when using the results of search engines we have to determine the truth ourselves, just as we need to do with self-proclaimed specialists. Attitude, mimicry and intonation are important clues about the quality of information too. We combine all the collected data into an answer to our quest, leading us to our truth. We store everything in our own digital memory, our brain, with the intention of retrieving them one day, preferably in an unaltered form.

The present information society appeals to our cognitive skills. More and more, people have to process a great deal of information in order to make often complex decisions. It seems to be taken for granted that we know how to deal with this information effectively. We teach our children technical skills and develop their personal competencies, but their information skills still do not receive sufficient attention.

Ninety per cent of all new jobs concern finding and processing information. Information work is consequently rapidly becoming the most important task of many employees. Despite the increasing flow of information, organi-

sations are taking few, if any measures to support their staff members in this area. They assume that employees have developed the necessary skills at school or on their own.

A basic knowledge of information (*its characteristics, how it flows, how we acquire information and how we turn knowledge and wisdom into information*) is now an essential competency for all employees. Dealing with information skillfully is not easy to learn. We have to consciously pay attention to it. Sometimes we may indeed have known or at least suspected that there is more to the acquired information than meets the eye. Excuses such as ‘not having enough time’, ‘not feeling like it’ or ‘not having an assistant’ are no longer acceptable. Our well-informed friends and colleagues provide conclusive proof of this.

Doing nothing is out of the question. Both our ability to work independently and our self-confidence will grow when we control our information flows well. Developing an insight into our own information behaviour and that

of our environment is essential. These information skills will soon become the only distinguishing feature of a person and of an entire organisation.

‘Working smarter’ means working less. Most information dates very quickly. Furthermore, a lot of information we seek can be found faster and cheaper by others. So why do we

not delegate it to someone who can do it faster and better, like we do with plumbers and electricians at home?

Managers who delegate more show that they trust their colleagues. They also make more use of their colleagues’ capacities. Dealing with information in a smarter way mainly involves allying ourselves to people who can do that. Woodrow Wilson, the 28th president of the United States said: ‘I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow.’

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