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how improvements
in information
productivity can be
gained by paying
attention to the
people side

■ *Effective Information Exchange*

IN the last century we have been able to exchange large amounts of information between people. Earlier, all communication was done in the physical presence of senders and receivers, resulting in two major advantages: to obtain as much information as possible through our five senses and to build up a profile of the senders' information exchange characteristics.

Contemporary IT tools used for communication, such as e-mail, text messaging, chats, blogs or video sites, generally address only one or two of a person's senses. Also, given the often one-sided type of information exchange, the sender uses a medium type that suits him, and maybe not the receiver of the message per se. Moreover, in most cases the recipient of transmitted information is not known, as Internet instance-usage-patterns show.

One could argue that to date hardly any reliable statistic is available on information usage behaviour of any information resource. If you buy a book or local newspaper, print a web page, or if you attend a presentation, there is no real knowledge about what the receiver

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will do with the acquired information. Yet, all of us have experienced situations where our minds were changed, sometimes dramatically, by the information that we received. You know that this information gives you new insights or a different look at things, which is the result of information properly sent and accepted. If we want every piece of information to be accepted and used, we should begin with the receiver in mind.

More and more people work in virtual teams. It is very common that most team

members will only meet face-to-face after a considerable time, if ever. Hence, they miss out on a number of advantages that physical encounters provide in the exchange of information. People still like to talk to people in real life. That is, after all, what we have been doing for the last million years or so. Modern technologies like telephones, webcams, and others, are only mediocre surrogates. Therefore, when people engage in direct, face-to-face contact, it is critical that the recipient remains the information sender's primary focus.

Several measures have been identified to increase the likelihood that the receiver finds the information valuable and usable. Two proven measures will be described here.

Information Profile: People differ in the way that they collect, analyse, and disseminate information. Yet, hardly anyone actually uses this knowledge when they exchange information. When we communicate, we mainly think about ourselves. Receivers do not generally provide feedback when receiving unwanted information. Such feedback could help the sender disseminate information in more accurately and timely ways in the future.

An information profile serves as an aid to understanding a person's information habits. It is a list of a person's information characteristics. It describes the aptitude, attitude, and handling of a person with regard to information. Just as someone is described as, for example, extrovert, action-oriented, or friendly, so can one elaborate on how a person usually deals with information.

Three of the many elements of an information profile are:

- *Information junk:* A person's curiosity for information. Some people collect information for the information itself. They are never satisfied and know that most information gained is useless.
- *Reader or listener:* Evidence shows that 70 per cent of all people are readers, whereas 30 per cent like to receive or transmit information orally. It also depends on the medium, content of the message, timing, and the like. Most people are readers *and* listeners. They take notes while listening to a presentation, for example. That is a good thing: the more cues a person gets and the more senses are addressed, the better new information is kept in one's memory. If you want the receiver to understand the message, you have to know how he prefers his information.
- *Piler or filer:* People use many strategies to organise their information sources. Many rely on visual displays and cues: for them the applicable advice is "out of sight, out of mind". They

accumulate huge piles of documents, books, and magazines, which at first sight might seem chaotic. They also have a seemingly cluttered desktop with numerous links. They are referred to as pilers. They work best by keeping their work in sight, as it helps them recall what is in it and keep track of what they have to do. Filers like to structure their life by putting information away in an organised manner in neat closets or electronic systems. They work best when their desktop is clear of everything except what they are currently working on. Clutter distracts them. They keep things they are not currently working on out of sight, using alphabetical, numerical and other systems to keep track. Both filing and piling help people mentally organise their time, tasks and materials; each calls for a different type of workspace design. A filer is aimed at 'finding', a piler at 'reminding.'

It is necessary to have an understanding of the contexts in which a person seeks and uses information. And that context unfortunately changes due to time, money, or other constraints.

Successful people know that an important step in effective information behaviour is to know yourself. For example, do you know how much information you receive per medium, how much time you spend per medium, and if you are using technology in the most effective way? If one needs to change, you have to be familiar with your own way of working.

Information Coach: The most important factor in organisations nowadays is information literacy, which is defined as a set of abilities to recognise when information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use it effectively. Only when a person recognises his own information behaviour and that of others can he take the right steps in improving the way he acquires, analyses, and disseminates information.

It is against this background that a new and important information function is emerging: the information coach. The information coach helps employees understand and improve their information

behaviour in three ways: first, assessing the best information environment for an organisation; second, providing assistance in helping managers and employees selecting the best training and support organisation for their behavioural information issues; and finally, identifying the information profile of an employee and recommending improvements they can make to become literate and productive with information.

One of the reasons for this new function is the dependency by more and more organisations on reliable, timely, and accurate information. An organisation also has to balance compliance responsibilities with confidentiality, whereas new technologies can help by giving it finer-grained control over the collection, management and security of its information. Another reason is the insufficient information literacy of the average employee. New tools to manage information require a new way of working for many information workers, yet not many have been trained in using them. The older generation is only just catching up with the tools and practices of information work today.

Numerous measures have been developed to help people attain good information behaviour. No single tool, procedure, or technique will correct the problem, but an effective information coach will provide training in the following areas:

- *Information aptitude:* One's inherent ability for learning, understanding, or performing with information. A person's appropriateness with information is given at birth, although it changes with the acquisition of information skills and capabilities. A coach can access how the information worker understands the reader/listener concept, his propensity to 'pile or file' information,

and how his five senses are addressed by content.

- *Information attitude:* The positive or negative views a person has towards information. A person's attitude influences his behaviour and changes with his experiences with, in this case, information use. Typical measures make people aware if they are, for instance, an information junkie and can help them work out what they have to know – to save them time. Ignorance may, in certain situations, be an asset.

- *Information handling:* The ways in which individuals deal with information in day-to-day activities. How he manages and uses information relates to personal

traits, attitudes and beliefs about information. The main techniques that an information coach teaches about information behaviour relate to concepts like filtering, personal information management, communication, time management, information pruning, diet, etc..

Numerous excuses can be given about why people do not want to change their information behaviour. Fear, anxiety, not being 'in the know', or simply being obsessed with the control of information is among them and providing more information is hardly ever a solution. Too much information, in fact, is a fundamental part of the human condition.

Improvements in information productivity can only be gained by paying more attention to the people side of information. It is the only way to be truly productive with information – and the role of the information coach is to address this in a way that reaps positive business benefits. The definition of an information profile is part of his toolbox in helping people at work and at home dealing with information in more productive and effective ways. 



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