

CONTAINING INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Practical steps to manage the flow

All government agencies and the individuals who lead them have a reasonably good idea of the kind of information they need to be gathering. This includes data about their own agency; significant developments; citizen and consumer information; relevant as well as pending legislation; special applications; breakthroughs; and prospects for the future.

In every field, a handful of key publications, news sources, websites, and blogs represent the cream of the crop in terms of accuracy, completeness of coverage, timeliness, and reliability. Rest assured that the top three to five information purveyors often provide 85 percent of the coverage of what all other sources could collectively provide due to overlap, redundancy, meta-reporting, and outright lifting of news between sources. So it's prudent to focus on the highest sources of information in the field.

Stay Focused

Everything is for naught unless you have a way to gather, synthesize, apply, and disseminate that information so that it benefits you, your organization or department, or end-users.

Keep information flows as simple as possible. Stay focused on your strategic objectives. What do you seek to achieve, and what information supports that quest? Keeping your eyes on the prize and staying focused will help you to achieve goals more effectively than any other way of proceeding.

Much of the information we encounter and retain supports what we already know, believe, and don't need to retain. Much of the information you need to assemble to prepare a report or

a presentation is but a few key strokes away. Hanging onto reams of hard copy information or various files of online information, in anticipation of a future need, is of limited value.

The information glut that we each experience occurs partly as a result of not having guidelines in place within our own agency that could otherwise spare us from exposure to data, reports, and verbiage that do not address our challenges.

Streamline Correspondence

Each of us needs to be kinder and more thoughtful as well in disseminating information to one another within the department. Eliminate buzzwords, acronyms, abbreviations, and symbols that could be misunderstood in your e-mail correspondence.

Limit the length of the correspondence to those phrases that are vital to ensuring that the proper message is received. Encourage one another to avoid cc-ing and bcc-ing individuals who do not need to be in the loop.

When practical, include executive reports, briefings, and summaries that enable the recipient to understand the essence of what larger documents contain. Avoid sending FYI types of information altogether. Keep attachments to a minimum.

Organize E-mail Signatures

In the course of your professional life, a variety of routine responses will emerge that should be saved as part of your e-mail signature capability. Most popular e-mail software programs support 20 or more different signatures.

Thus, you can compose and retain signatures in particular categories so

as to be able to respond quickly and effectively to inquirers. Pre-identified signatures could include standard letters, rosters, fees, descriptions, credentials, background, and history.

The more you automate your system, the faster and more effectively you can respond to a correspondent. Any signature on file obviously can be adapted to address specific inquiries as they arrive.

Assess Periodically

Finally, recognize that the information that you retain on a periodic basis needs to be reassessed for its applicability. The most effective information managers are in the habit of constantly updating and eliminating, merging and purging, and synthesizing and applying the vital information that they chose to collect in the first place.

Make an effort to pare down the amount of paper that you retain in your desk, filing cabinet, and office. For each document you receive that merits retention, evaluate its potential as a scanned document.

If the scanned version of the document will serve just as well as the hard copy, then scan it and recycle the hard copy. Also, effective computer backup systems take on an advanced role in an age in which it makes sense to reduce the physical holdings of reports, documents, and sheets of paper.

Managing to Be Effective

The future belongs to effective managers who engage in appropriate information management. Regardless of size, budget, or other resources, they are consistently able to point the organization in the right direction, as a result of the information they have assembled, the knowledge they extract from it, and the wisdom they are able to share. **PM**



JEFF DAVIDSON, MBA, CMC, is principal, Breathing Space® Institute, Raleigh, North Carolina. An author and presenter on work-life balance, he holds the world's only registered trademark from the United States Patent and Trademark Office as a "Work-Life Balance Expert"™