

InfoTech Column  
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## Is There Such a Thing as Information Overload?

by Stephen Abram

**“Information overload** refers to the state of having *too much* information to make a decision or remain informed about a topic. It is often referred to in conjunction with various forms of computer mediated communication such as e-mail and the web. The term was coined in 1970 by Alvin Toffler in his book *Future Shock*.” (Wikipedia)

*"Interruptions aren't merely annoying; they're also bad for productivity. And when you multiply the interruptions made possible by email, phone calls, text messages, and Twitters across the entire US, the result is **lost productivity on a massive scale: \$650 billion in a single year.**"*

That's a really big number according to research firm BaseX ([www.basex.com](http://www.basex.com)) which chose "information overload" as its 2008 "Problem of the Year." They predict that failure to address the issue of enterprise information overload will lead to "reduced productivity and throttled innovation." Also, Intel's Nathan Zeldes estimates "the impact of information overload on each knowledge worker at up to eight hours a week."

Wow! It sounds to me like these enterprises need more librarians! This isn't the first of these studies that show the massive impact on productivity for knowledge workers of poor information strategies. Some of the reported symptoms include the the inability to make clear and accurate decisions, increased personal stress levels and a reduced ability to concentrate on priority issues due to interruptions. Some research suggests that overload lowers IQ due to diffused focus. It's been well discussed over the years from information overload through technostress.

### Causes of Information Overload

Wikipedia outlines these general causes of information overload:

- “A rapidly increasing rate of new information being produced
- The ease of duplication and transmission of data across the Internet
- An increase in the available channels of incoming information (e.g. telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, RSS)
- Large amounts of historical information to dig through
- Contradictions and inaccuracies in available information
- A low signal to noise ratio

- A lack of a method for comparing and processing different kinds of information.”

I think it's easily explained as information content growing faster than people's ability to absorb and deal with it. The good news is that there are processes and strategies to address these problems on the enterprise level. It all centers on our profession and stepping up to the plate to promote our value to our organizations.

## **The Skills that Information Professionals and Librarians Enhance**

### **1. *Search, Seek and Find***

Widespread access to the web and its riches has created the illusion with the average end-user that they have unlimited access to quality information. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a vast difference between simple, positive, information experiences when choosing a movie, vacation or restaurant and those required when one is betting the business. Hundreds or indeed thousands of expensive co-workers spending hours seeking information on the web and not finding it or finding it very slowly, or repeating these efforts many times across many employees is not a good way to run a business. If informed decision-making is the goal of organizations then organizations must, logically, invest in excellent information practices. Empowered librarians do this.

### **2. *Going Beyond the Free Web***

We all know that there is good content for free on the web. It is, however, not a competitive advantage to have identical information to everyone else. It seems simple but it's amazing to me how many executives fail to grasp this concept! Information wants to be free – not just cost free but unfettered. The best way to unfetter information is to employ an information professional. The free web is riddled with information rot, aging websites, bad links and more. Simply put, librarians know how to access quality, on point information.

### **3. *Determining Authority***

Few people can determine authority and authoritativeness to a business standard. Librarians can. This issue goes beyond brand. It's about making sure that the information that users base their decisions on is trustworthy. Ask, do we want our doctors basing our own health decisions on the free web?; Anti-terrorism strategies?; Your own legal defence? Really – are there any critical questions of life that we would trust our own lives to the free web? Why would we apply a different standard to our

enterprise strategies? In many sectors the latest information is sometimes the best. On the web it is often difficult and sometimes impossible to gauge the currentness of the information being accessed. When it really matters, you need to know. Librarians can look under the hood of content and websites, and increase the trust factor.

#### **4. *Separating Fact and Opinion***

This is the essential skill of true information literacy (and a bunch of other literacies too – media, critical thinking, and more). As our media outlets continue to blur the line between reporting and editorial opinion, this is getting to be a more critical aspect of information practice. I believe that most people cannot tell the difference between a blog and a website or a news article and a column. As we support decisions based on information, it is essential that someone can separate fact, opinion, bias, and point of view. Enterprises must value this skill or risk disaster.

#### **5. *Understanding Optimized Search Results***

Too many end users do not understand the role that the search engine optimization industry (SEO) plays in search result rankings. Special interest groups, partisan factions and advertisers have at their disposal a range of tools that allow them to influence what is displayed on the search results that end users see. With localization of SEO becoming more commonplace, your organization is at risk. Does anyone think it's good that your competitors may be optimizing the results for your co-workers? Value added, for fee or OA databases are not (or at least less) subject to this result manipulation.

#### **6. *Filtering and Adding Value***

Again most free search engine results give the searcher a huge number of results. This is overload at its worst. Good librarians filter out the best based on the context of the user and their question(s). Great librarians also add value to make the information more instantaneously useful.

#### **7. *De-Duplication***

With most web searches you find tons of duplicate information. Making end users filter and read all of this is a definite waste of time and productivity. On an organization-wide scale it's a huge waste of money and staff time. Librarians remove the duplicate information and polish the search results to enhance the productivity of our patrons. Licensing haystacks and finding needles are two different things!

#### **8. *Cost Effective Enterprises and Efficiency***

In the old days of time-based pricing for online, librarians became adept at 'fast' in-and-out searches. Now the game is played differently. Enterprise-wide intranet licensing and the needed end-user training can be cost effective solutions to organization wide information productivity issues. Librarians excel at this.

## **9. Credulity**

As anyone who has been on the Internet for decades knows, spam, phishing and other Internet scams are not new. For whatever reason, there are people out there who have reason to introduce false information into the web. Others just leave superseded information out there through neglect. It takes some time to develop credulity skills and ensure that the information tools and content offered is credible.

## **10. Content and Tool Awareness**

Lastly (although I know there are many more talents!), when your enterprise depends on information to make great decisions then you must invest in content, information systems and information professionals like librarians. You must invest in keeping up-to-date for competitive advantage. If an organization doesn't then it deserves to decline and expire. Most organizations depend on informed decisions and knowledge-based learning. Imagine any major knowledge enterprise today doing otherwise. Would you hire a law firm, go to a hospital; invest in an R&D-based company that failed to have good information practice? I hope not.

If we are truly entering a knowledge-based economy (and I believe we already have in the developed world), we better speak up more clearly on the roles that a variety of information professionals and librarians play in assuring success. These are SLA's membership. Perhaps SLA could target investors, venture and equity capitalists? Maybe we need to say that they shouldn't invest in firms that have horrible information practices and lack professional staff and software to manage knowledge assets. If their knowledge assets are at extreme risk, so is the value of your enterprise and its future. They expect these firms to have professional auditors. Isn't information practice just as important?

Hmmmm. It's still up for debate as to whether an individual can experience information overload as a syndrome. But I can come out firmly on the side that enterprises CAN suffer from information overload. The cure? Librarians.

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