Abstract. On a typical workday, how many e-mail messages, faxes, and telephone calls do you receive? How many times are you interrupted at work? In this session, participants will complete an exercise, and then the presenters will facilitate a discussion about information overload causes, symptoms and countermeasures.

One recent study found that the average North American knowledge worker receives more than 142 communications per day; in the form of e-mail messages, phone calls, face-to-face interruptions, etc. Spira (2005) estimates that unnecessary interruptions consume 28 percent of the average knowledge worker’s day, imposing 28 billion lost hours on American companies each year, at an annual cost of $588 billion.

What is Information Overload? Eppler and Mengis (2004) define information overload as simply “receiving too much information.” The popular notion that information is power, that more information means higher performance, operates only up to a point. Beyond this point, people become overloaded, and more information leads to performance deterioration. It is important to understand causes and symptoms of information overload, along with possible countermeasures to ease it.
**Causes.** According to Kock (2000), the causes of information overload include: time pressure, poor prioritization, and the amount of information received. Shaw (2005) observes: “while technology is supposed to be helping us work faster and more efficiently, the reality is that we’re so swamped with e-mails, phone calls, text messages, interruptions and ill-planned meetings that it’s hard to get any work done.” Jensen (2004) suggests that the top three daily time wasters are: meetings; dealing with communication from others, such as e-mails; and communicating to others.

Individual factors, e.g. experience, mood, and managerial skill level, contribute to information overload. Characteristics of the information (quality, complexity, and novelty) are additional contributors. Elements of the task, including time pressure and frequency of interruptions, can add further fuel to the fire.

**Symptoms.** The symptoms of information overload include: greater stress levels, confusion, analytical superficiality, slower and less effective decision making, reduced job satisfaction, and even health issues, along with family problems. Hazelwood (2000) warns: “symptoms include a hyper-aroused psychological condition, a paralysis of analytical capacity, and anxiety and self-doubt, leading to foolish decisions and flawed conclusions.”

**Countermeasures.** To reduce information overload, Allert (2001) proposes several extreme measures, such as: one-minute limit on voicemail; 10 “free” e-mails per day, as the sender; a limit on PowerPoint slides for presentations; and daily internal e-mail downtime. Countermeasures to ease or eliminate information overload should be part of your firm’s knowledge management (KM) system. Training to enhance employee communication skills should also address information overload causes, symptoms, and countermeasures.

**REFERENCES**


