

Information Overload

Technology gives all of us the ability to generate and have access to vast amounts of information. For many people they are in a situation of information overload and it is critical that they reduce the amount of information coming their way. Journals, Fliers, Reports, Drafts for comment, For information copies, Meeting minutes (whether you attended the meeting or not), Company correspondence, Departmental correspondence, Personal correspondence, Jokes, Chit chat can all clog up your in tray / in box in a matter of a few hours. Dealing with this incessant stream of information then becomes a coping exercise and takes you away from the really important parts of your job.

Where to Start?

Look at your "Goods Inward". What is arriving in your in box / in tray? Why has it come to you? (Could you live without it? have it in a different form, receive it less frequently, have it placed in a central file area where you can access it if / when you want). Our evidence suggests that for many people their overload is to some extent self-imposed through not determining what they truly need and what is nice to have (or even a frippery!). Take action to reduce the amount of low importance material that is coming your way.

Reading

Just because someone gives you something to read, you don't automatically have to read it. You decide whether it warrants your attention. Measure it against your core objectives – will this really help you to achieve them?

Some tips:

- Ø Quickly determine whether it is something that you need to read now (A) can read later but it has a clear time scale associated with it (B) can read at your leisure (C) or will never probably read (D). Dump the D's now straight into the bin. Action the A's and file the B's and C's appropriately. Be ruthless about the D's get rid of them now!
- Ø Read the contents list and summaries / final paragraph first – it may tell you all you need to know (or that you don't need to read it all).
- Ø Ask people to write an executive summary so at least you know the main thrust without having to read the whole document.
- Ø Build up a reading pile of documents / articles that are not time sensitive but that you need to read at some stage. Use a cancelled meeting / travelling time / occasion when your PC is being fixed, to catch up on this reading. However, don't store it on your desk, as it will only serve as a distraction.
- Ø Ask other people to read articles for you and ask them to give you a brief verbal or written report on them.

e-mail

When used properly email is a huge time saver. However if you are spending 1 – 2 hours or more a day answering messages, it's probably become an enormous time consumer!!

Set aside time in the day to read your emails – don't interrupt your self every time an email message arrives (turn of the horns, trumpets or other notifications etc). Treat your messages like paper ie – read it and "make a decision" - Work to do – Note it on your master list - file it. Pass it on or bin it - Don't need it – delete it..

Talk to your colleagues if you feel you receive too many cc emails that do not contain any important information for you. Check for yourself if you are sending any unnecessary cc emails to your colleagues which they might not need for their work.

- Ø Don't over use it.
- Ø Only send messages that are work related.
- Ø Don't over use your mailing list – only send them to people who need to receive them.
- Ø Remember – The fewer messages you send the greater attention they receive.

Managing Your desk

Fact - People on average spend 22 minutes a day looking for papers, documents and files that are lost on top of their desks!

Fact - Each piece of paper on your desk will distract you up to 5 times a day.

Our experience of working with people who suffer from the Cluttered Desk Syndrome (CDS) is that they like to believe that having all of their files and other information at their finger tips means they can react quickly in any situation. The truth is more often that their Cluttered Desk is a sign of poor organisation and a lack of effective systems. For example, a new piece of paper arrives on your desk. You pick it up, read it and decide whether you can or must do it now. If you can't then you know you should file it. But we don't, do we! Instead it is added to (one of) the ever growing pile(s) on our desk as a reminder of its presence and need for action.

Rather than having the quarterly blitz on your desk where you basically throw everything into a black sack (and typically within a fortnight it is back to the way it was) analyse WHY things are on your desk. This can take some time but it is the only way to make a lasting improvement on how you manage your desk. Examine each and every item that is on your desk and ask "Why is it here?" The answer may be, "I've not got around to reading it yet" or "I've not finished it yet" or "It's not been filed, yet" etc. Whatever the answer, ask yourself WHY this is the case and continue asking WHY until you have got to the root of the issue. This will lead you to what you need to do to stop your desk returning to its CDS state.