Chapter XXIV

Information Overload in the New World of Work: Qualitative Study into the Reasons and Countermeasures

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors present a revision of the information overload concept elaborated by Eppler and Mengis (2004). The main elements of our approach are literature synopsis and analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and discussion. Their review of the information overload concept is multidisciplinary as we identify similarities and differences among the various management perspectives and refine it with the empirical findings. They hope that by doing so, we can identify synergies between the theoretical conceptualization (Eppler and Mengis, 2004), and real-life settings. They present results in a highly compressed, visualized format that allows for a more concise representation of the subject domain, easy comparisons, and hopefully – reduction of information overload. The empirical study was done at the Microsoft B.V. (The Netherlands) where Information workers became the most important type of workers within an organization.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we present a revision of the information overload concept (Eppler and Mengis, 2004) based on the extensive empirical findings. The main elements of our approach are literature synopsis and analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and discussion. Our review of the Information Overload concept is multidisciplinary as we identify similarities and differences among
the various management perspectives and refine it with the empirical findings. We hope that by doing so, we can identify synergies between the theoretical conceptualization (Epper and Mengis, 2004), and real-life settings. We present results in a highly compressed, visualized format that allows for a more concise representation of the subject domain, easy comparisons, and hopefully – reduction of information overload.

As an empirical setting we take the real-life consultancy world, one of the leaders in knowledge intensive economy. The study was done at the Microsoft B.V. (The Netherlands) that has introduced the New World of Work (NWOW) - a vision of Microsoft Corp. first articulated by Bill Gates in May 2005 (Gates III, 2005) and detailed by Dan Rasmus (2005) in the daily life of employees. NWOW identifies and examines technological trends in the changing world, investigates the challenges they present for workers, organizations and governments in the next ten years and describes how investments in technology and practices to empower Information workers can lead to better outcomes. It thereby argues that Information workers are to become the most important type of workers within an organization. Therefore, the vision mostly focuses on Information workers.

Our study investigated a part of Microsoft B.V., viz. Microsoft Services. Within Microsoft Services we focused on one ‘type’ of employees, Microsoft Services Consultants, who are in true considered as the main information processors.

The term Information worker is widely used in the New World of Work environment, and we use it in our research, too. In today’s knowledge economy, when knowledge-based capabilities are becoming more and more important (Whicker, 2004), information workers are the ones who possess knowledge-based capabilities. The importance of the function of information gathering and processing has already been recognized some time ago, by Tushman and Nadler (1978). Also, several authors stress the need for managing knowledge as a product (Wang, 1998) or even state that knowledge capital is of such importance that it should be listed on the balance of a company (Strassmann, 1999). The knowledge worker sector has become important to overall productivity, because of size and growth (Drury, 1999).

The term knowledge worker has originally been introduced by Peter F. Drucker, in 1959, as a differentiator between employees that do not own the means of production, and those who do own their means of production. This latter group is the people the knowledge workers; they ‘produce’ with their brain and ‘sell’ brain-hours to the organization. By contrast, manual workers typically do not own the factory equipment they use to produce their output. This way of identifying knowledge workers is not very clear, and as a result various augmenting descriptions of knowledge workers exist. In particular, Knowledge Work has been defined as a profession, as a characteristic of individuals, as an individual activity and as organizational behavior (see Kel- loway, 2000, for a discussion of these four ways of defining Knowledge Work).

INFORMATION OVERLOAD AS THE CHALLENGE OF INFORMATION WORKERS

Organizations and individuals working in those organizations are exposed to ever increasing amounts of data they are required to process (Tushman, 1978) due to increased connectivity and increased use of IT. Individuals and organizations, however have a limited information processing capacity. This gives rise to an important challenge: coping with Information Overload, i.e. the situation that the information processing requirements exceed the information processing capacities. The problem of Information Overload has been noted by Davis (2002) and by Drury (1999) as a challenge posed by unlimited access computing.