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PATHWAYS

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Focus:

Information Overload

I doubt there is a reader of this publication who does not suffer from information overload. The rate of information growth and change today - with new products and services, increasing competitive challenges, evolving global events, new regulatory agency requirements, and the like - can be overwhelming. How can our knowledge management, employee development, and training functions keep pace? For that matter, how can any of us keep pace?

Some would say, "The Web has come to our rescue. Information is only a few clicks away." That may be true, but what it really means is that we now have better access to more information, some of which is helpful, yet a lot of which is not.

One thing is certain. Simply dumping more and more information upon people as it becomes available and leaving it to them to search through - even if it is in a Website - is not the answer. Without some "sifting" and structuring, burgeoning infobases and hours of PowerPoint™[1] presentations will not be endured. There have to be better methods of dealing with this information overload.

In this issue we offer some suggestions for dealing with part of the overload issue. Our focus is in two critical areas, staff training and corporate information management.

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President/CEO

1 PowerPoint is a registered trademark of Microsoft Corporation

AT ISSUE:

Information Access Alone Is Not Enough

The flood of information we face today is overwhelming. How do we separate the critical from the "nice-to-know" and from the superfluous? How can those with the responsibility for information transfer within our organizations cope? It is not that information dissemination tools aren't there. We have at hand such tools as presentation software, eLearning facilities, resource management software, and Internet/intranet websites dedicated to various topics. But the quantity of new information and the increasing degree of information change have become overwhelming. It is not enough simply to make the new and changing information available to our employees; we have to practice more sophisticated information management.

Information Management Methods

There are four broad information management methods available:

1. Information sorting – "Who needs what information?"
2. Information relevance structuring – "How does this information relate to our enterprise and to each of its organizational groupings?" "How does it relate to me and my job situation?"
3. Information elimination – "What are the critical few essential details?" "What might be useful to know, and what is too detailed or esoteric for practical use by a given audience?"
4. Information redundancy reduction – "Is the same information addressed in too many places?" "Must people with a need for information access a myriad of sources to locate that information?"

Keeping these guiding principles in mind, let's now look at some concrete examples of how to get our arms around the information overload problem. We will focus on two broad areas:

- ***Employee development and training***
- ***Corporate information management***

continued on page ***2***

At Issue *from page* ***1***

Controlling Information Overload in Staff Development and Training

Providing access to information is **not** the same thing as training. Training entails the selection and matching of content to trainee needs. It entails practice and learning verification.

Just as the instructional methods appropriate for experienced employees usually are not the best for new hires, neither are the ways we should control their access to knowledge. New hires assume that every fact and detail presented during training is important to learn and critical to their job. They have no experience base for assuming otherwise. Therefore, those who develop training for new hires must do a high degree of information filtering to avoid overwhelming the trainee.

Highly experienced employees, on the other hand, often have developed the ability to do much of their own "filtering" of new information. They usually know, instinctively, what is important to their situation, what's nice to know, and what is irrelevant.

But, what about those in the middle? And what about those in highly different job functions? For example:

- Do those in marketing need the same information about a new product/service as those in accounting?
- Does the product development team need to share all of its technical information with the sales team for them to be able to sell the product?

If not, who makes these content filtering decisions and how best can they be made?

Content Selection/Inclusion Decisions

The general rule here is, "Don't leave training content selection up to content experts." By definition, content experts view all related information as important. Developing and maintaining detailed, accurate information is their job. Even if they came up through the ranks, they are unlikely to know what content is most or least important for each of the many functions throughout their organization.

Instead, call on content experts to:

1. Provide raw content that is current and accurate.
2. Review draft instructional materials for content accuracy (but **not** for completeness of detail).

Call on experienced trainers, managers, function heads, and the like to:

1. Divide audiences into logical skill levels and training groups.
2. Establish realistic objectives for each instructional unit, given time constraints and learner motivation.
3. Identify the "critical few" – those items of content required by each training group at each skill level.
4. Review draft instructional materials for flow, clarity, and relevance.
5. Arbitrate differences between course developers and content experts about the need for content inclusion.

Content Decision-making Guidelines

There are some general guidelines which help us make content decisions for all employee training programs:

- For content review, both distance and face-to-face communications work, depending upon the requirements of the project.
- Analyze, select, and limit content based on the needs of the job position(s) for which the training is being developed.
- Don't confuse content delivery with training. Content delivery is only one aspect of training. Practice and evaluation are also critical components of all good training programs.
- Don't list every infobase resource remotely related to the topic. Help students by listing only those resources most concise and germane to the topic at issue.

The sidebar tables provide some additional guidelines, in the form of do's and don'ts, for content selection and elimination.

Employee Level	Do	Don't
New hires	• Limit content to the bare essentials. Much more will be learned later, on the job. • Point out what must be mastered and what need only be understood. • Limit or eliminate "nice-to-know." • Provide contextual examples to show how students will be applying mastery information on the job. • Provide job-related practice (exercises, quizzes, role plays, etc) for information to be mastered.	• Expose all new-hires to the same content. • Fill training with "amusing", non-essential anecdotes and "war stories." • Expect the student to know what is important.
Intermediate experience	• Point out what must be mastered and what need only be understood. • Point out how content is typically used on the job. • Provide exercises and self-checks that reinforce critical, not "nice-to-know" information. • Provide practice in searching infobase searches for information closely related to course activities • Reference one or, at the most, two infobase sources rather than everything out there.	• Make information access time a major portion of training/study time.
Highly experienced	• Recognize that highly experienced employees typically have better-developed info screening skills. Ease of access to needed information may be more critical than frequent training sessions. • Call on participants in group sessions to explain why data is relevant or critical to their job responsibilities • Limit redundant information sources by pointing out those infobases most focused on learner needs.	• Make information access time a major portion of training/study time.

Controlling Knowledge Management System Content

Users of knowledge management systems often face not only a surfeit of information, but information redundancy as well. Sometimes (especially in very large firms, conglomerates, and global organizations), users face the need to access knowledge stored on scores or even hundreds of separately maintained infobases. In many organizations, as infobases have evolved, each organizational entity has developed its own. As a consequence, it is not uncommon to find the same topic headings with totally or partially redundant documents across infobases. In other organizations, related knowledge can only be accessed from multiple infobases if the user understands the unique coding structure of each. Thus, it is not unusual to find that users spend more time accessing and doing self-sorts than in actually digesting the information from their search.

The demand on the time of more experienced employees is often such that it limits their time for carrying out information searches. They need information search facilities designed for efficient use. On the other hand, while inexperienced employees may have more time for detailed searches, they often lack the experience and background necessary to

continued on page **4**

AT ISSUE *from page* ***3***

evaluate the appropriateness and quality of the information they find.

Organizations are taking a number of steps to deal with these issues. They are:

- Forcing the consolidation of Websites to eliminate redundancy and proliferation.
- Establishing "user profiles" that allow information to be pre-selected for each user based on criteria that is important to the person and the organization, i.e., their job role, experience level, current assignment, etc.
- Pushing "relevant" information to users based on their profiles, individual interests, company requirements, and role specific needs.
- Providing tools to help users join special interest groups for collaboration, i.e. bulletin boards, chat rooms, expert locating, and question-answering tools.
- Improving the user interface and search engine capabilities on their sites. For example, they may provide individual "portal" pages for each user, let users define most elements on their unique portal page, maintain clear history of use by each user, and constantly monitor and eliminate redundant and outdated information.

In summary: The proliferation of new information is not going to abate. Our organizations will function better now and into the future if we take immediate steps to improve training and infobase information management.

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