

Is Your Information Strategy Deeply Flawed?

Many of us get the evil eye from spouses when we can't stop clicking away on our Blackberries or other smart devices. This is particularly vexing at meals or other times that should be family time. None of this is surprising, it's easy to understand how annoying this is and how it interferes with interpersonal relationships. But what about at work? It's okay to show how efficient we are at multitasking by taking our electronic devices everywhere, right?

Well, it turns out that multitasking does not make you more effective. Our brains work best when they are focused on one task. When we switch we become less efficient since our brains can't successfully tell us to do two things at the same time. "Multitasking is not heroic; it's counterproductive," say Derek Dean and Caroline Webb in a recent article for McKinsey Quarterly (Dean is an alumnus of the firm's San Francisco office and Webb is a principal in the London office). In fact, they say, while multitasking "lets us quickly cross some of the simpler items off our to-do lists," it rarely helps us solve our really complex problems. "More often than not," they add, "it's procrastination in disguise."

Moreover, exposure to tons of information does not help fuel your creative process. A study of 9,000 individuals at the Harvard Business School by Teresa Amabile and her colleagues found that creative thinking is higher when people focus on one activity for a significant part of their day.

Simply put, we're drowning in a sea of information fueled by our 24/7 multitasking work environments and, we're feeling less creative and stressed out as a result. So what do the experts say we need to do? Falling back on Peter Drucker's advice from the 1960s still works—we need to focus, filter out what distracts us, and find time to forget and give our brains a rest. But it may also mean that organizations need to step back and rethink how to make their knowledge workers more productive.

Thomas Davenport, a McKinsey alumnus and holder of the president's chair in information technology and management at Babson College, says a new strategic approach to knowledge work is needed. In an article for McKinsey Quarterly he says, companies need "a clearer view of the types of information that workers need to do their jobs" and the type of technology that is best suited to helping them complete the tasks they need to perform.

He explains that there are two approaches to information access for knowledge workers: free access and structured provisioning. The most common method is giving knowledge workers free access to information and allowing them to determine their own work processes and needs. In this model, "the presumption is that knowledge workers, as experts, know what information is available and can search for and manage it themselves," says Davenport.

This method provides lots of autonomy and gives employees a positive feeling about their work environment. The information technology that supports this model is also relatively easy to implement, relying heavily on the Internet, social media and third-party databases. The biggest problem with the free-access approach is workers may not be skilled at searching for, using or sharing knowledge and may waste time looking for what they need or figuring out how to use it when they find it.

The structured-provisioning model, says Davenport, delivers information to employees within a well-defined context of tasks and deliverables. "Computers send batches of work to employees and provide the information needed to do it," he explains. An example of this is workflow technology that controls how employees get information and their work tasks (such as content management systems, business process management systems and collaboration tools). This can also be called case-management systems because they allow the worker to complete an entire case of work (i.e. processing an insurance claim).

The greatest benefit of the structured model is increased productivity. It reduces the time it takes to complete a task and makes it possible to route work to the person who is available at the time. Managers also benefit from the consistency of decision making. Of course, workers may react negatively to the structure and lack of autonomy in their work. There is also added upfront system costs, since there is a need for process design and systems work to implement approach. A structured model is less flexible too, since the system is designed to tackle a specific problem with a particular process.

Davenport notes that until recently the structured approach has been used primarily for lower-level process work. That, he says, is changing, as advanced technologies are making it possible to deploy this methodology for tasks that require expert thinking and collaboration. Some organizations are trying out a hybrid approach-using a structured system that an expert can override.

To determine the best approach for your employees requires identifying your knowledge workers and understanding the specific knowledge tasks they perform. Davenport uses a four-quadrant matrix to help identify the types of workers and the approach that works best for each one. Whatever path you take, there are challenges. Moving workers accustomed to a free access model to a more structured approach can be met with resistance and must be handled sensitively. It's equally important to realize that human judgment sometimes needs to overrule an automated decision. That should always be carefully considered.