

# Handling Information – Avoiding Overload Checklist 150



## Introduction

Worldwide access to the internet has dramatically increased the availability of information. The abundance of information can make it difficult to distinguish the quality or usefulness of information presenting managers with the need to restrict the amount of information they access to a manageable level, and of balancing external, general and public information (such as business, political and economic news reports) with internal sources that are specific, tailored and usually private. Too much information causes anxiety and inefficiency whilst insufficient information can lead to ineffective decision making, management by guesswork, and adverse consequences for business.

Controlling the flow of information requires a disciplined, informed and consistent approach to the processes of selection and evaluation. This checklist is for those who are concerned with the ever increasing amount of information they are required to handle and describes a structured approach to controlling information overload.

## Definition

For the purposes of this checklist, 'information' is used in its widest sense and includes written and oral, formal and informal communications.

Many different skills are needed to handle information overload effectively, including the organisation and delivery of information. Some of these are covered by related checklists (see *Related Checklists* on page 5 of this checklist).

## Action checklist

### 1. Know yourself

People differ in their capacity to handle information so it is worthwhile considering how much information you feel comfortable coping with at any one time. Establish how you deal with the various methods of recording information. Do you write notes of conversations or rely on memory, are you the kind of person who is able to make mental links between related pieces of information, or do you need a more formal system such as an index to help you to find all relevant details? Be aware that information may be found on demand (when you search for it) or appear serendipitously (when a colleague tells you something in passing), and that both are valid and important.

### 2. Manage your time

If information swamps you continuously, set aside an amount of time each day or week for activities such as the evaluation of information. Stick to the time limits you set.

Think about:

- how much time is available
- how flexible this is
- how much time can be spent on information processing
- the ways in which you work, do you break off from a sustained task each time that an e-mail arrives?

### 3. Focus on objectives

Focus on current objectives, or the information you might accumulate under the umbrella of 'may be useful at some time in the future' could quickly overwhelm you. It is important to define objectives and priorities - for information purposes - in terms of 'must have', 'nice to have' and 'not necessary for me to keep'. Concentrate on what you need to know, not on what might be nice to know. When time is pressured these objectives will contract; occasionally there will be time for them to expand.

MUSTs include those pieces of information which:

- meet defined objectives
- are task-oriented
- relate to needs
- fit a designated purpose
- provide knowledge and understanding that will progress activities.

NICE to HAVEs include information which:

- might be useful one day
- is unsolicited and unnecessary.

NOT NECESSARYs are often obvious but also include information which:

- is easily obtainable on demand
- will not cause any damage if missed.

### 4. Choose access and delivery methods

Choosing access and delivery methods is important throughout any cycle of information control. The medium can influence the message, or drown it if we are not careful. All information sources consume time in different ways:

- libraries of printed materials can take ages to sift and sort through
- database or Internet searches can leave you with hundreds of references and it can be very time-consuming to narrow these down to the most relevant
- Internet portals or communities promise to provide all you need on a subject but may end up by flooding you with masses of unedited data
- a message sent by email for convenience, may involve printing out 80 pages

Libraries have the benefit of being systematically put together - be especially wary of information sources that are not organised. Choose your medium with care, or you may end up with too much poor-quality information which will need culling. Keep objectives and selection criteria firmly in mind. Familiarise yourself with sources of information and learn how to use them; you will then be able to retrieve information more effectively when you need it.

### 5. Establish selection criteria

We either deal with information as soon as it arrives because it is something on which we need to act, or we:

- pass it on to someone else - this may just be passing the problem on rather than solving it, unless you know that the recipient has a need for it

- save it for a rainy day - this means that you will become weighed down with clutter which takes time to organise, and may not give a profitable return on the effort invested in it (not even the largest of electronic libraries can hold everything people might need)
- get rid of it - this is often the only sensible, practical option.

Asking the following questions should help determine which of these is the best course to follow:

- Do I need this NOW? Can I use it on a current project?
- Where does this come from? Is the source reliable, reputable?
- Did I ask for it? If it hadn't arrived, would I have gone looking for it?
- Is it speculative, substantiated or controversial? Is it directly about the subject in question?
- Is it worth keeping for the future? Could I get hold of it again if needed?
- Is it worth passing to someone else?

## **6. Gain confidence in what you know**

We do not know what we do not know. However, when we read new material in the hope of finding new ideas, we may discover that we are aware of most of the contents and reading it has not added to the sum of our knowledge, although this may perhaps be helpful in reassuring us that we are up-to-date.

It is important to gain a picture of how often this happens, and how frequently something striking and worthwhile comes your way. This might provide you with your own 80-20 rule. Allied with your knowledge of proven/best/reliable/innovative sources, this may assist you to cut down on the quantities of repeat information heaped on you.

## **7. Consult**

Often a face-to-face conversation is worth a thousand memos and reports - it is a question of investing initial time to make savings later. Your colleagues are probably your best source of information, but should be supplemented by your own short-list of experts you can trust to help you cut your way through to what you really need. This may include a professional body, specialised library, government department, local Business Link or Chamber of Commerce. If you want to get to grips with a subject, get hold of a summary article, digest or checklist from a reputable source.

Most organisations have 'gate-keepers' - people who gather large quantities of information and are good communicators. These people can help you to sift and filter information. Find your own gate-keeper if you don't have one already.

## **8. Be ruthless with paperwork**

- remove your name selectively from external and internal mailing lists
- ask colleagues to report by exception, and then to be concise - 1-page management summary
- return unnecessary paperwork to the sender, or bin it
- if you can use someone else as a 'sifter', do so - but make sure this does not result in them being overloaded as well.

## **9. Be ruthless with electronic data, especially on the Internet**

- work out personal screening procedures, for example, culling information by source or origin, for example
- use software that ranks content by relevance rather than scan through hundreds of documents
- don't pass on messages which 'might' be of use; give them only to those who you know will be interested
- remember to use the delete key. With too much dross there is a swift, although final, answer
- if important information comes to you from the Internet, consider using feeds and similar ways to get information "pushed" to you instead of continually spending your time looking for it – but .
- be wary of subscribing to numerous open e-newsletters or discussion groups, where comments are circulated to everyone

## Managers should avoid

- becoming a slave to routine activities which have lost pertinence
- tolerating unsolicited rubbish
- dealing with a piece of paper more than once.

## National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance to the following standards:

A: Managing self and personal skills, units 1-3

F: Achieving results, unit 1

## Additional resources

### Books

**Six frames for thinking about information**, Edward de Bono  
London: Vermilion, 2008

**Overcoming information overload** (CMI Instant Manager series), Tina Constant and Morris Taylor  
London: Hodder Education, 2008

**Know can do: put your know how into action**, Ken Blanchard, Paul B Meyer and Dick Ruhe  
San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett Koehler, 2007

**The hamster revolution: how to manage your email before it manages you**; Song, Mike ; Halsey, Vicki ; Burrell, Tim, San Francisco Calif, Berrett Koehler, 2007

**Introducing information management: the business approach**, Hinton, Matthew, ed, Oxford, Elsevier Butterworth Heinemann, 2006

**Taking control of your time**  
Boston Mass. Harvard Business School Press, 2005

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:  
[www.managers.org.uk/library](http://www.managers.org.uk/library)

## Related checklists

Effective business writing (091)  
Handling effective meetings (002)  
Managing your time effectively (016)  
Stress management – self first (034)  
Successful delegation (112)

**This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact**

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