**KEEPING SANE IN DILBERT'S WORLD**

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We hate them. We cannot seem to live without them. They do everything in their power to make our lives miserable and you are sure at some level they are truly evil. And you know that if it weren't for them you would probably manage to be more productive at the office, during office hours. The two evils of the 20th century: cubicles and email. Neither were born evil, but through misuse and overuse they have become the bane of many office workers and it is unlikely that we will escape their tyranny in the near future.

In an attempt to keep office workers sane many companies, such as Intel, have started implementing a tool used by nannies and nursery school teachers world wide: Quiet time. The implementation varies from company to company, quiet time can take the form of scheduled times during the week in which employees are forced to work in full "offline" mode, others are not allowed to physically talk to another employee for two hours a day, there are others who are encouraged to talk but not to email, and some have gone all out and implemented "No email days".

Communication, one of the most important information sharing and knowledge creation tools we have, has also become one of our biggest time wasters, we seem to want to communicate even if we don't really have anything important to communicate about. And some employees are seriously addicted.

**Infomania:** The debilitating state of information overload, caused by the combination of a backlog of information to process (usually in email), continuous interruptions from technologies like phones, instant messaging, and email (I would like to add that cubicles have no doors). It is also understood as a distraction caused by the urge to check email, text messaging and other sources of information,

which causes the person to show symptoms of neglecting other, often more important things –
duties, family, etc. Infomania is a psychological debility.  Symptoms also include the frequent
checking of email over weekends and during vacations. (Source:  Wikipedia).

One of the first things we try to teach our Information Systems students in their first year is that
there is  technically no such thing as information overload.  It cannot exist, theoretically speaking,
because we have a definition that does not allow for it.  But yet, here we are floating in a sea of
information, and some of us are drowning.  So what is Information, according to the definition?

**Information is processed data, which are communicated to users, who uses it to make
decisions.**

Therefore Information, by definition, is only Information if you find it useful.  The vast majority of
communications you receive during a day is trivial, entertaining, perhaps informative, but not really
useful.  The fact that they are not useful to you at that specific time does not however render all of
these communications unimportant.  And it is these communications that tend to lead to an overload
and a drop in productivity.

Brown and Duguid in their book: The social life of information, explains that one of the most
important functions of the office social system is the provision of a collaborative learning
environment, in which problems encountered are collectively solved and solutions are shared among
peers, thus bridging the gap between procedures and practise.  Within well functioning groups this
knowledge is readily shared among peers through constant conversations (and ironically it is one of
the strengths of the cubicle).

It would seem then that we are faced with a conundrum.  Employees need to be able to
communicate with each other, but this constant communication is causing our employees to be
unproductive, frustrated and some just prefer to quietly work from home.  This natural flow of
knowledge is also severely disrupted in distributed organisations, spanning across various service

lines, departments, geographical regions and time zones.  Knowledge and expertise is embedded within individuals and are easily lost by the organisation when an employee is no longer employed by them.

Social Networking platforms have long been accused of having a negative effect on productivity.  It is perhaps true, if your employees are unsatisfied and unmotivated by their jobs they will rather spend their time gossiping and chatting with their friends online.  These same employees can also spend endless hours taking a smoke break, getting water, going to the bath room, making coffee and talking to everybody they encounter between their desk and the copying machine.  Social Networking platforms might, if implemented correctly, and if the communication tools are used wisely, offer us a solution to ensure that all our employees are communicating without being disruptive, or excluded because they are working from home or another country.

One of the requirements that have to be met by a platform in order to qualify as Social Networking 2.0 is that it should support two or more modes of computer mediated communication.  Office communication typically span across many types of communication tools, document formats, desktop applications, and sources within and outside the firewall, and can include email, faxes, instant message chats, manuals, spreadsheets and presentations.  The integration of different modes of computer mediated communications into one application allows knowledge workers to aggregate information in an efficient manner, by allowing users to add labels (through links, tags and social bookmarks) to make information more persistent for easy retrieval and sharing.

Productivity and workflow are often hampered by the use of email, instant messages, telephone calls, and open door policies (and open cubicles).  Synchronous or real time communication (such as telephone calls and meetings) can be time consuming, interruptive and cause decreased productivity, while asynchronous or delayed communications (such as email) are often misused or overused, or ignored.  By decreasing the use of emails and other disruptive communication methods, the use of asynchronous communication methods, such as blogs and wikis, can increase productivity and work flow efficiency.  Other examples include:

- Tagging and social bookmarking allow colleagues to search for and locate experts and "look over their shoulders" at the industry articles, blogs, manuals, wiki's and other information that the expert finds useful, and so discover answers and solutions without interrupting them with email, instant messages or telephone calls.

- Allowing users to contribute to discussions, planning and decision making, when they have time to do it, in an open forum, without the need to send and resend emails to all participants, or schedule endless meetings.

- Wiki's also allow users to always have access to the latest version of a document.

Organisational resources are often wasted when employees have to reinvent fixes or solutions to problems, which have already been created by someone else within the organisation.  In a perfect knowledge management system, all knowledge is non-rival and it should only be produced once.  Any additional resources incurred should increase its value and accuracy to eliminate mistakes and deficiencies encountered in the past.  Social Networking 2.0 can assist organisations to create an online resource containing the accumulated wisdom of the organisation, by allowing knowledge to be codified, searched, edited and shared.  It also allows individuals to identify the most appropriated person to contact for a specific solution.

By providing knowledge workers with multiple computer mediated communication tools, Social Networking 2.0 will allow individuals to make appropriate use of these tools which will lead to increased productivity and work flow efficiency.  The following table illustrates examples of what would constitute effective and appropriate use of some of the computer mediated communication tools:

| Computer mediated communication tools:  **One-on-one** (Example: **Email, Instant messaging**) | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Time critical communications |
| 2 | Private and personal communications |
| 3 | Confidential or sensitive information |

| Computer mediated communication tools: **One-to-many** (Example: **Blogs or webpages**) | |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Push" ideas to a broad audience |
| 2 | Share knowledge in a narrative format |
| 3 | Traditional communications, such as newsletters |
| 4 | Informal forums for discussing issues with staff, customers and partners |
| 5 | Answering questions |
| Computer mediated communication tools: **Many-to-many** (Example: **Wiki's**) | |
| 1 | Questions and answers |
| 2 | Collaborative planning, and joint decision making |
| 3 | Knowledge capture and classification |

In 1937 Ronald Coase published his landmark study on the nature of firms and the open market. He found that firms can be more profitable than the open market due to the fact that they can operate at lower transaction costs. The emergence of the Internet and Social Networking Sites has caused open market transaction costs to shrink. Finding and contracting individuals with the required skills, experience and knowledge has become cheaper and easier.

In most firms their biggest asset to achieve their market advantage is knowledge. Knowledge comprises experience, specialist skills and the practical knowledge of how the organisational processes operate. Managing the accessibility of knowledge within organisations is becoming a critically important facet of Information management systems, which are being forced to become more social and user friendly without disrupting productivity.

Selected reading:

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