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# Information overload!

Screaming down the digital superhighway, the modern workforce shows signs of being overwhelmed by its tryst with technology. **Cameron Cooper** investigates the problem and how organisations are responding.

**If you think workers'** complaints about information overload are exaggerated, consider the evolution of techno-babble.

Employees around the world are now suffering from 'CrackBerry' addiction and 'BlackBerry Thumb', chronic pain between the thumb and wrist as a result of overusing their personal digital assistant. Large numbers are also reportedly experiencing 'search-engine fatigue', meaning they are impatient when unable to quickly find the exact information they need. Then there is the fight against TUNA. No, it is not an anti-seafood crusade but rather a battle to cut down on 'totally uninteresting news and admin' that is jamming internal email systems.

As the internet, email, PDAs, mobile broadband access, RSS feeds, news aggregators and other technology streams take over corporations, staff are buckling under the strain.

A report from US research firm Burton Group, titled *The too much information age: What CIOs can do about it*, highlights the dilemma: 42 per cent of IT managers complain that they

are inundated with too much information; 39 per cent say that they cannot distinguish current and redundant information, and 38 per cent say they need to shed duplicate information.

The crisis does not surprise Dermot Crowley, one of the directors at Adapt Training Solutions, a Sydney-based productivity training company, who says that the increasing accessibility of information today is making it more and more difficult to determine what is useful and what is not.

"There is a huge amount of time every day spent actually weeding through the stuff that you know is not relevant to you, and there's an anxiety and a stress that comes with the sheer overload of that," says Crowley.

Email is perhaps the biggest culprit. Crowley says employees in large organisations are guilty of sending random emails that create internally driven spam for other staff members.

"At a recent training course for one of the corporate banks, I had a participant who was receiving 400 emails a day. Of that there was a good 300 that he received as a result of the distribution lists he





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belonged to in that organisation, and those emails tended to be irrelevant to his role.”

### Breaking point

Research from content security firm Clearswift indicates that more than half of the HR decision-makers in companies have had to discipline staff for wasting their time on the internet during working hours, while three in four Australian companies are denying their employees access to social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo because of productivity concerns.

Australians are not alone in feeling the pinch. A 2008 Workplace Productivity Survey, commissioned by LexisNexis, reports that more than seven in 10 American white-collar workers feel inundated with information, while more than two in five feel that they are headed for an information ‘breaking point’.

The problem is particularly acute in the legal profession. On average, the legal professionals surveyed say they handle 36.7 incoming work-related emails daily, with 22 per cent reporting that they receive 50 or more in a typical day and 6 per cent saying they receive 100 or more.

Donna Hanson, a Director of computer productivity services firm Prime Solutions, believes staff must make a conscious effort to shift their work focus away from email inboxes.

“You’re being paid for your KPIs and not the number of emails that you send per day during your working hours,” she says.

Hanson adds that software to divert emails and manage information is unlikely to be enough.

“The real answer with this overload is the strategy and your approach to this excess of information.”

Consensus among IT experts suggests the following strategies can help ease information addiction.

- 1 **Schedule email checks:** set aside time to check emails two or three times a day rather than monitoring them throughout the day.
- 2 **Turn off email chimes:** email alarms and screen pop-up notifications prompt people to respond immediately to messages, disrupting workflow.
- 3 **Limit BlackBerry use:** avoid real-time access and check it on a predefined schedule.

Some companies such as Intel and Deloitte have even opted for email-free days, but Hanson says that anecdotal evidence indicates that such a response



could backfire because many employees will simply store up their emails and send them at a later time. Such initiatives have even led to server collapses when email comes back online.

“So that’s a very reactive answer to the problem of email volumes,” Hanson says.

On an individual level, Crowley says the best solution is a high level of email organisation. Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes tools can be used to set up email pathways that automate email flows to designated folders. They capture catchwords that are embedded in subject lines or the body of emails.

However, users must also take responsibility for inboxes and start deleting emails or responding efficiently to messages that require action.

Crowley is blunt: “Addicts have to set boundaries for their usage.” He sets a goal for computer users: when you walk out of work on a Friday afternoon try to have an empty email inbox.

Crowley says that advanced internet searching skills will increasingly become a priority for office workers.

“One of the most critical skills, now and going into the future, is going to be the skill set around searching for information. We have to become really

efficient at being able to narrow down our searches to find exactly what we want.”

If not, search-engine fatigue will become chronic.

### Management focus

With new technological advancements, one thing is certain: information levels are only going to increase.

Theresa Anderson, a University of Technology Sydney information and knowledge management lecturer, says it is time for management to take the lead. “In any organisation you need strong leadership, practising what they preach and listening to the ways that the organisation works and wishes to work.”

Anderson says it is critical for management to address overload issues if they want to maintain and improve work environments. They should encourage the dissemination of common workplace announcements on a company intranet or, heaven forbid, an old-fashioned bulletin board rather than resorting to company-wide emails.

It is important, too, to have ‘change agents’ who can implement changes from the ground up.

“People need to see examples within the organisation that show the need for, and value of,



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Robert Beerworth, Wiliam



different ways of communicating and working with information. This can happen from above, below and at the same level,” Anderson says.

She says shared e-workspaces can also help. Web 2.0 technology allows information sharing in web-based communities such as wikis and blogs.

“One of the big things that tends to overload email and BlackBerries is the exchange of documents,” Anderson says. “Not only do you have version control issues but also email-load issues.”

Investment bank Dresdner Kleinwort credits the use of a wiki service with cutting email use by up to 75 per cent. Similar to the concept of free encyclopedia site Wikipedia, it allows staff to set up pages for projects and lets them edit text, add comments and link to documents and graphics in one central online location. Staff no longer have to rely on emails to communicate or manage a project. IT research firm Gartner Group forecasts that wikis will become mainstream collaboration tools in the majority of companies by next year.

Crowley agrees that management can help staff overcome information overload, including BlackBerry addiction. He advocates protocols for the use of PDAs to encourage users to turn them off.

“All too often, I think, people feel that when they’re given a BlackBerry the unspoken text is: now that you have it we expect you to be available all the time and you will answer emails at 11 o’clock at

night... There’s a lot of peer pressure that people feel that once they’ve got a BlackBerry they have to be in the loop all the time.”

### Aggregator aggro

So-called newsreaders or news aggregators are also part of the solution – and problem – with information flows. They allow users to subscribe to feeds from diverse news and blog sources. These feeds are known as RSS, an acronym for rich site summary or really simple syndication.

While such a summary service can be useful, it also drives another stream of information for users.

Robert Beerworth, Managing Director of website development firm Wiliam, says aggregators help his firm stay abreast of industry trends.

“We subscribe to hundreds and hundreds of these feeds and they keep us really well informed,” he says. “We also encourage our clients to integrate RSS feeds into their websites. They really allow users to dissect and precisely choose what they receive.”

The key, of course, to limiting RSS overkill is to limit the feeds to which you subscribe. Beerworth is a supporter of Web 2.0 blogging which enables a company to communicate with clients.

He also believes intranets are a valuable tool for businesses if used correctly. Unfortunately, too many businesses set up an intranet that can cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars and then ignore it.

Regardless of the technology and the terminology, it is clear that more understanding of IT innovation is required. Clearswift reports that 42 per cent of HR managers are unfamiliar with Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube and Facebook.

Such ignorance of technology is a worry, in anyone’s language. **IVI**

Cameron Cooper is a Sydney-based business writer.

## » Technology tools

**News aggregators** They use a web feed to retrieve syndicated content, including the latest news or weblogs. Aggregators can help users stay up to date with the latest market information or news. RSS is a form of news aggregator.

**Intelligent search engines** While Google is the standard bearer, new search tools are emerging to more efficiently ‘mine’ information, with the ultimate objective being to develop an engine that mimics the way the brain processes information.

**Wikis** Websites that allow visitors or staff to add, remove, edit and change content online. They can be useful for businesses as they provide affordable and effective intranets for knowledge management.

**IPTV** An acronym for internet protocol television, it has been created to allow people to watch TV over the internet.

### To take away

- ▶ Complaints are rising about the level of TUNA (totally uninteresting news and admin).
- ▶ A critical skill set for the future is the ability to search efficiently for new information.
- ▶ Experts suggest protocols for the use of technology to avoid information overload.
- ▶ Change agents are needed within organisations to implement different ways of working with information and communicating with each other.