01: WHITEPAPER

INFOMANIA

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Just when you thought
you had everything
under control...

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*"People will choose
unhappiness over uncertainty."*

TIM FERRIS

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The last 10 years of technological history have been simply remarkable. Only in the last decade we have produced more information than in the last century. Today, one third of the population is online and every 20 minutes, 864 more hours of video are uploaded on YouTube and 2.5 million photos are added to Facebook and Instagram. We have radically transformed the way we consume information and connect to each other. But it is not only about the information we consume, it is also about the way it's been delivered.

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In the last 3 years we have invented 3-D screens on mobile devices, new applications for cloud computing, gestural Interfaces, real time search and social television just to mention a few. The pace at which we are innovating and learning is astonishing, yet we haven't been able to fully understand how to deal with these changes without feeling overwhelmed and constantly distracted.

Although on the surface we may seem to positively evolve towards some sort of society utopia, this overproduction of information and accelerated development of new technologies has not happened without a cost. According to Reuters "Dying for Business" report: "One-third of managers are victims of "Information Fatigue Syndrome. **49% said they are unable to handle the vast amounts of information received**. 33% of managers were suffering ill health as a direct result of information overload. 62% admitted their business and social relationships suffer. 66% reported tension with colleagues and diminished job satisfaction. 43% think that important decisions are delayed and their abilities to make decisions are affected as a result of having too much information".

Information overload

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Source: Reuters "Dying for Business" report

Information overload is an issue that cannot longer be ignored. It is too expensive to overlook specially because it's embedded in the way to work; the way we communicate and ultimately the way we entertain ourselves. Information overload works like a silent killer. Since the first iPhone was released we have been slowly growing a camel hump at the back of our necks. Constantly checking our phone while having face-to-face conversations, commuting or simply having dinner has become less of a habit and more of an addiction.

"It's far too rarely stated that the technology industry is not in the business of making people productive. It is only in the business of selling more technology"

MARK HURST, BIT LITERACY: PRODUCTIVITY IN

THE AGE OF INFORMATION AND E-MAIL OVERLOAD

"Overload 'em with information an' they'll kill yeh jus' to simplify things."

J.K ROWLING

Back in 1970 Alvin Toffler pioneered the term Infobesity in his book Future Shock. He clearly explained that as the world becomes more knowledge oriented our ability to process increasing amounts of information diminishes. This is the result of information overload. Feeling overwhelmed, tired and constantly procrastinating is highly correlated to our need for multitasking. The belief that we can get more done by doing several things at the same time is a myth that has caused tremendous losses in human attention span and productivity.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, the psychiatrist who coined the informal term Attention Deficit Trait (ADT) asserts that the cognitive impact of Infomania causes people to work well below their full potential. They produce less output, think superficially, and generate fewer new ideas – despite working an increasing number of hours there is also evidence showing an increase in error rates, including errors in management decision–making.

Another myth that has had a huge impact on the work environment is the association of amount of information with certainty -The more information the better - This has proven not to be case in most instances. Our human capacity to connect and analyze high volumes of data inputs is more limited than we think.

In a report published by Nathan Zeldes; an outstanding figure in the field of Knowledge Management, reveals that for a typical knowledge–intensive company of 50,000 employees, Infomania causes a damage of about US$1 billion per annum.

As employees and entrepreneurs are faced by constant interruptions, multiple distractions and too many sources of data, efficient decision making has slowly but surely been affected.

What can be done?

Understanding how to avoid information overload.

80/20 principle: What is the smallest amount of information you need in order to react appropriately?

The Pareto principle, also known as the 80–20 rule and named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. This principle has been used in a wide range of areas, from consultancy to time management.

"Bit literacy means letting the bits go; anything else perpetuates the problem."

MARK HURST, BIT LITERACY

*"It's not information overload.
It's filter failure."*

CLAY SHIRKY

In today's world most of the information we need is available a few clicks away. However, that same readiness also contributes to analysis by paralysis and low levels of attention span. The problem is not necessarily the abundance of information but our ability to recognise what is useful from what is not.

When it comes to metrics, less is more. In the Lean Analytics book, Alistair Croll proposes to concentrate on what he calls the One Metric That Matters (OMTM). He says, "Focusing doesn't mean myopia. We're not saying that there's only one metric you care about from the day you wake up with an idea to the day you sell your company. We are, however, saying that at any given time, there's one metric you should care about above all else. Boiled down to its very essence, Lean Startup is really about getting you to focus on the right thing, at the right time, with the right mindset. In the world of analytics and data, this means picking a single metric that's ultra- important for the step you're currently working through in your startup...Don't let your ability to track so many things distract you. Capture everything, but focus on what's important."

Before going in the hunt for as much information as possible, first concentrate on identifying what kind information of could make a difference or what is the minimum you may need to make a decision. Having enough context for decision making is great but is not an excuse for creating over bloated reports.

Uniformity: Visualise information in a consistent way: There is an entire body of research on data visualisation and even though it seems that everybody has a different opinion on the subject, we found that Stephen Few and his book Information Dashboard Design can offer effective insights into the basic principles for data visualisation that can be incredibly useful at reducing the effects of information overload.
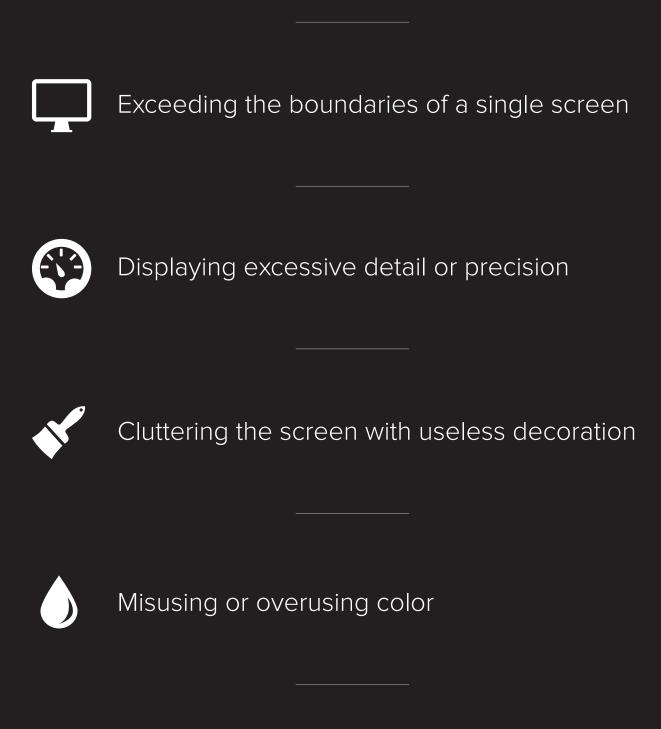
In his book, he covers some of the common pitfalls in dashboard design; these principles can definitely be applied to any data visualization tool.
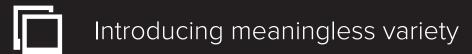
On the following page are some of the pitfalls Stephen point outs and we found crucial to avoid in data communication.

When it comes to data communication less is always more. There is so much that the human brain can assimilate at glance. If your aim is to build a data driven culture, simplifying data absorption is crucial. Not everybody has a passion for numbers and reports; in order to democratize the data within any organization it is imperative to strip off as many layers of unnecessary information as possible.

Pitfalls to avoid

In data communication.

Exceeding the boundaries of a single screen

Displaying excessive detail or precision

Cluttering the screen with useless decoration

Misusing or overusing color

Introducing meaningless variety

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"Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide."

NAPOLEON

—

Open Decision-Making: Integrating people into the process

Professor John Ousterhout from the Department of Computer Science at Stanford wrote a very insightful essay on open decision making, he explains: " "Decisiveness" is generally considered to be a positive attribute for a manager, suggesting that good managers make lots of decisions. I disagree: the best decisions are recognized, not made. A decision made by management is an indicator of problems: there isn't an obvious right answer, the group is conflicted (perhaps because of politics), or management isn't listening to the group. Sometimes managers have to make decisions, but this is a necessary evil, not a desirable situation. The manager's primary job is to create an open decision-making process and facilitate consensus, so that good decisions emerge quickly"

Promoting conversations about data can be the first step in building the foundations of data driven decision-making. One of the simplest ways to do this is by making data visible to the organization. Just by displaying your key metrics in areas where your team and in some cases customers can see can make a big difference in the way you look at your business.
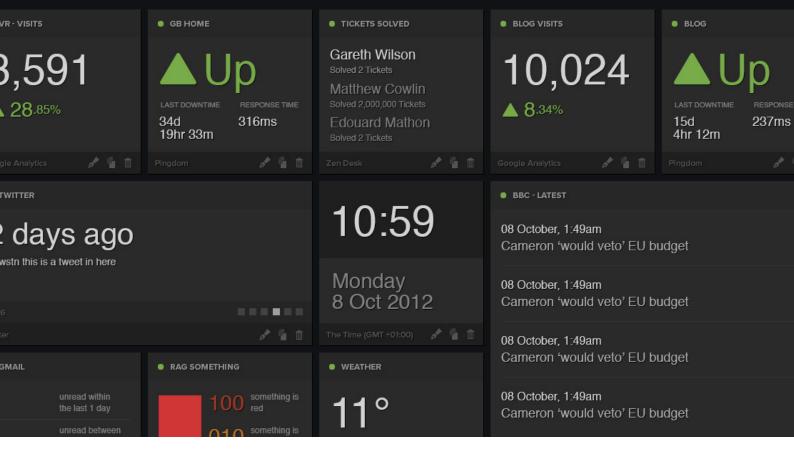
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In Conclusion

Be aware of information overload and its consequences.

Decide what is the minimum information you need in order to make better decisions.

Communicate data correctly and make it visible.

Involve people. Decisions are better when they come from consensus.

Meet Geckoboard - It's your key data in one place.

If you are interested in facilitating data driven culture within your organization we would like to invite you to join Geckoboard.

Geckoboard is a real-time status board for businesses. It collects your business information from many online services, summarizes it to distill the key messages and displays it in a way that's easy to understand and interpret. It's hosted by us and accessible from anywhere with an Internet connection.

vist: www.geckoboard.com

GECKOBOARD

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September 07, 2009
The Danger of Information Overload
http://breathingspace.com/the-danger-of-
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By Jeff Davidson, ©2012