Title:
Information Overload: The Silent Burden

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561

Summary:
Article on information overload and why IO is still an underestimated threat to productivity.

Keywords:
Information Overload, Knowledge Management

Article Body:
Information Overload is an interesting phenomenon. Everybody knows it's a major obstacle to productivity but if you ask people you'll find out that not many are thinking on how they can deal with it in a systematic way.

For instance, do you agree that information overload has a negative impact on your day? And: when have you last taken some time to consciously think how you can deal with it more effectively? I am not talking about quick fix solutions like simply cutting back on information consumption (which is often the subconscious solution), but really spending some time to come up with solutions that reduce the negative impact from information overload without running the risk of missing out on the important news.

For many their honest answer to these two questions implies a certain paradox. It might be a bold statement, but information overload may be a problem with one of the highest "negative impact" to "what is done about it"-ratios.

I've been thinking why this is the case and came to the conclusion that it's mainly due to two factors: one is the incremental costs of IO, causing people to underestimate them, and the other is that information overload's costs are not very well visible.

The incremental costs of IO can be demonstrated best if we try to quantify them. For instance Basex, a US research firm, made this attempt with a focus on costs due to interruptions from communication media. Basex starts looking at IO's impact for a knowledge worker per hour before extrapolating it to the whole US economy. The damage that is done are frequent interruptions (reducing productivity) that only feel a little annoying at the moment we experience them.

However, at the end of the day (or year), if we take all the costs together it has accumulated to something of enormous size.

I don't want to get too philosophical here, but the underestimation of incremental things seems to lie in human nature. For example, most people have once realized with surprise how quickly the spending of small amounts of money can add up to something significant. Or if we first hear about interest rates' impact over a longer period of time, e.g. if we invest in some financial products today, don't touch or think about them over a decade, and then look to how much it has accumulated. The same phenomenon might be at work with information overload, causing us to underestimate the damage that is done overall.

However, information overload is even nastier than this. In the example with the money spending, we will realize it someday (when we see the bank statement at the latest!). Unfortunately there is nothing that counts the costs of information overload, so even after the damage has been done it is not very well visible. Thus we are not fully aware of the damages and we continue as we did before without adapting to deal with the problem.

Information overload can therefore be seen a silent burden that, despite its well-known existence, might still not get the full treatment it deserves. Every knowledge worker should at least spend some time to think about how to deal with IO in the best possible way – which will lead to a significant long-term increase in productivity. Some advice on this in one of the following posts.