

Straight Talking – Communication overload, 9 ways to go on hold

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Most new technology goes through a number of cycles as its use evolves – the novelty of invention, the feature explosion of differentiation, then hopefully the robustness of consolidation.

Sadly the frenetic pace of change means the third stage is often slow to arrive, and with techies in control of many companies, new features are seen as the way to stay ahead. In the early 1990s arms race in word processing tools this led to the jibe, “who needs 9 ways to do ‘bold’?”

Arguably 9 different people might each have their own preference, but having too many alternatives has a cost, not only in development, but in the selection for most appropriate use. Choice on the face of it is a good thing, but leads to confusion and inefficient dithering.

This is particularly apparent with communications, where with such a collection of numbers, inboxes and routes to be contacted by – fixed phones, mobile phones, Skype handles, text messages, emails, Instant Messages – the question now might be “who needs 9 ways to be put ‘on hold’?”

With so many recent advances in communications networks, both broadcast and personal, you’d think it would be getting easier to communicate, but far from it. While access to the plethora of broadcast media is relatively under the control of the individual through the buttons on the remote control, the growth in a diverse media communications society has opened an avalanche of ‘incoming’ for individual to individual contact.

Choices started multiplying in the 1990s when open email started to take off, along with the ubiquity of the mobile phone. In addition to voice calls mobile phones provide the alert of incoming text messages, for some mobile instant messaging services, and for an increasing number, mobile access to email.

Anyone checking the array of mobile email solutions will realise that where once emails

could be ‘pulled’ on demand, they are now most often ‘pushed’. We have gone beyond information overload to communication overload.

While any of these ‘incoming’ messages or calls might be important or urgent, the likelihood is that most won’t be and as it’s generally impossible to tell (even with ‘urgent’ flags on email and caller id on phone calls) each one will be a distraction or diversion from the current task in hand.

Traditional good time management practice says that distractions slow productivity as most people work most rapidly if they can focus on one task until completion. Interruptions herald an internal mental switching of context, thought process and concentration from one area to another, burning away the veneer of productivity provided by each and every new form of communication.

Although some will use it as a welcome distraction, for many it is not. For their managers hoping the investment in communication technology was going to generate a significant productivity return there may be some disappointment.

So what can an individual do, and how can they be supported by their organisation to reduce the impact that communication overload has on their ability to be productive?

A great deal of communication may be spurious, or relatively low value, simply confirmation or checking, and so in many cases redundant. “Did you get my email?”, “Are we still meeting later?”, “I’m about five minutes away, see you there”, “Hello, I’m on the train”.

The ability to make and receive phone calls while travelling on the train or driving (where legally permitted), and pick up and respond to emails while in some boring meeting or other on a laptop or handheld mobile email gadget may simply be generating increased activity rather than productivity. Sometimes it’s not “good to talk”, at least when there’s nothing to say.

With so many communications channel options there is nothing to manage the sequencing or interaction between different channels. A voicemail sent after an email may be listened to first, as there is no knowledge of order between communication systems. Troublesome for an individual, but potentially disastrous from an auditing perspective, where actions triggered by one message, are not countermanded by another message through an alternative route. Policies that define suitable and unsuitable paths for different types of communication are worthy of investigation, supported by tools for auditing.

Although instant communication is always an option, it is not always the most appropriate path. In an environment where being responsive and available are the key metrics, there is always the danger that these measurements will mask the real priorities – adding value or reducing cost for the organisation.

There are some roles where a response is expected and needed at the broadest range of times – call centres, emergency services response – but not everyone, everywhere. On most occasions a measured, well informed, well judged decision is going to win out over the snap instant response to incoming.

Time management has formed part of background skills development for many employees, but the growth in communication channels means this skill needs widening. It is more than defining an etiquette for one form of communication or another (ie use a spelling checker, BUT NOT PERMANENT CAPITALS in email), and requires that individuals understand the different pros and cons of alternate modes of communication, how to select, and how to escalate from one to another.

The environment, both management and technology, has to support them in this. Defining 'urgent' and 'important' should be an integral part of the management process, just like setting and measuring objectives and annual goals.

Where technology is used to support the mobility of the individual – working from home, while travelling or in the 'standby' time between core working hours and leisure time – expectations of responsiveness and availability are vital for both manager and individual, and may need to be

negotiated now that work is rarely 9-5 sat at a fixed desk.

Technology can offer some direction and support, perhaps through a broader use and understanding of 'presence' and 'context', so that communication channels can be managed, but ultimately since individuals naturally communicate, they need to take responsibility for how and when.

Curing the issues of being too busy, having no spare time, or being constantly overloaded is often only a matter of setting and acting on personal and organisational priorities. Setting them should be a priority in itself, so that everyone can regain control and make best use of their working time.

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Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

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