

Hunter-seeker knowledge worker

Some people call it information overload, others data fatigue. But whatever its name you don't have to be victim to it. Here Anthony Landale reports on a new mental strategy that will get you to the information and knowledge you need, fast.

There's a guy who has just called up the radio station I'm listening to. The subject of the call-in is the about the impossible amount of information that drivers have to take in whenever they are driving on Britain's roads. But this guy who calls in has everyone in shock. He not only watches for signs and keeps an eye on his SatNav - he also has a digital TV set playing all the time in his car and also has DVD players in the headrests for any passengers he might have ... and on top of this he's on 'hands free' most of the time.

However, it isn't only in our cars that we are addicted to information. We can send and pick up emails and voice mails, texts and faxes anywhere, anytime. We even tote our laptops around with us on holidays and it appears that many of us are on message 24/7. Down time? 'If you snooze you lose' seems to be the belief which is running many people's lives.

But is it really as bad as this?

Just incase you are still not convinced consider these few facts ... that in the next decade there will be as much new information available as has been discovered in the whole course of human history ... that every year there are 50,000 new book titles published and that currently there are 550 billion web-connected documents. Small wonder it sometimes feels as though we are drowning in data.

So what can we do about it? How can we thrive in the 24/7 knowledge economy?

Clive Lewis is MD of Illumine and his company runs programmes for people and companies who want to improve their efficiency and knowledge management in the face of increasing information flow. "There are two distinct responses that people have to information overload," he explains. "On the one hand some people experience anxiety and stress and they want skills and techniques to help them rebalance their lives. On the other hand people see that this issue isn't going to go away and they are looking to become more mentally agile. They are looking for ways to navigate through all the streams of knowledge that are available to them and lead from the front. And that's what I am going to talk about here."

According to Lewis one of the core issues is that there is too much data smog around - low value information pumped out because the means of doing so are available - and we need to have better mental strategies for finding our way through it. What knowledge workers need, says Lewis, are ways to evaluate the information they receive so that they can get clear on what is useful and what isn't. They then need good techniques to absorb that useful information and be able to recall it whenever it is required.

"We ran a programme for the Common Services Agency in Scotland recently and their issues are typical of those found in all big organisations.," said Lewis. "People at the CSA face constant change and continuously have to take on board new ideas and information. Simply expecting them to work harder or longer to deal with their workload issues isn't a long-term solution. They need to work smarter. That is why we focused on providing them with leading edge thinking and productivity tools that would help them to take control of their lives," he said.

Three state approach

Now this sounds all fine and well but how does it translate to real life? Well if you want to stay ahead and build career success it looks like you will have to develop 'hunter-seeker assessment' skills. And it is for exactly this reason that Lewis has developed a '3 state' hunter-seeker strategy to help people navigate their way through all the data with which they are faced in order to get at the rich seams of knowledge that they need.

Said Lewis: "My approach recognizes that whenever we are faced with new documents we are continuously assessing their value to us. But we need sorting strategies and reading techniques that can help us to determine the relevance of the emails, reports and articles that we get sent. That's why I stress the importance to people of this hunter-seeker approach. It defines the states we all get to when we are looking to harvest for knowledge."

The three states of Lewis's hunter-seeker approach are outlined as followed.

State 1: A document arrives and assessment is required

In this first state, you the reader, are in receive mode. But you do not know whether the document, report, book, magazine or email that you have been sent requires your attention. So your first objective is to find out whether it needs to be read, needs to be delegated or can be ditched. To help with this assessment Lewis provides some specific tools - such as how to make a fast initial evaluation, how to conduct a rapid preread and how to draft a skeleton Mind Map - to establish what the documents are about and whether you need to give them any further consideration.

State 2: You now have preliminary understanding of the document

Your second state when you have conducted this assessment can be characterized as one of preliminary understanding. You know now whether the document you've looked at is relevant and, broadly, what it covers. You are still in assessment mode, however, and this will help you decide whether you need to read further and, if so, at what speed and depth that should be. Your strategies in this process are skimming, scanning and speed reading including a detailed Mind Map. The critical understanding here is that while some documents may just need a skim read you may also choose to go through others multiple times, building up greater knowledge each time. This process of multi-layering is a key characteristic of Lewis' hunter-seeker approach.

State 3: New knowledge is assimilated

Your state when you have completed the process above is now one of knowledge assimilated. And importantly you will have generated, as part of this state, a robust review strategy (your detailed Mind Map) which will have clarified and coded all the key information you need for easy recall. The drafting of your Mind Map is also a signal that you have met your knowledge assessment objectives and have completed the task in hand.

Continued Lewis: "My focus in information overload is specifically on assessment and evaluation. This is critical for managing information overload. You have to remember that while knowledge and information is the fuel for your career success the skill that executives need is in being able to seek out the gold among all the dross. In this context just consider for a moment ... when you pick up a document or magazine what are you looking to get out of it - factual information, learning, current news? You need clear objectives and a fast way to assess the value of the documents you have been sent. And you can be much more effective when you make this a conscious process."

Marshal the memory

There is also another key issue wrapped up in all of this - namely how, even when you have sorted out the precise information that you need, you can then remember it.

One of the problems that people are confronted with in information saturated jobs is that memory is limited. Not only do they therefore have to get better at coping with everything they receive but they also need to get much better at remembering and recalling what they have read.

Now in some senses this is familiar territory. We all know how much we forget in the first few days and weeks after we have tried to learn something new. But what are the best ways in which we can marshal our mental resources?

"First of all I want to challenge the idea that people are somehow born with a good or poor memory. This is nonsense. Some people have just learned how to use their memories effectively," said Lewis. "And if you want to improve your memory there are three main areas to focus on - imagination, association and location."

For Lewis the territory of *imagination* concerns the creative way in which people can transform information into memorable images. For example, what is the difference between a presentation that is memorable and one that makes you wish you'd never been there in the first place. The answer is probably that the one that is dull completely failed to fire your imagination. So if you want to remember information the trick is to use creative imagination to bring it to life.

Association is all about the connections you make every day from one subject to another. In other words, one thing reminds you of another. So when it comes to memory this is a technique that you can use to great advantage. If you want to remember someone's name, for example, all you have to do is consciously think of an association with that name. Clive Lewis, for instance, may be easier to remember if you think of someone famous with the same Christian name (e.g. Clive Woodward or Clive Owen) and the town in Sussex (Lewes). You will have your own associations here but the important point to make is that you can use associative techniques for any key piece of data that is important for you to memorise.

Location on the other hand is all about physical settings. Think of a friend and the chances are you will visualise him or her in a particular place. Forget where you left your mobile and you will probably have to retrace your steps in your mind, going back from place to place until you remember where you put it down. What we can see from this is that location is an anchor for memory - and some of the most powerful memory systems use location as their key underpinning principle.

What these three aspects share is the need in memory to stimulate interest. If you are not interested in what you are learning or reading then, quite simply, you won't remember it. In contrast, if you can develop an attitude where you are interested in what you are learning that will allow you to maintain your attention, engage with the material you are trying to take in, remember it and, importantly, be able to recall it.

"That's why we stress the value of Mind Mapping as a fantastic tool for people who want to use their minds and improve their memory," said Lewis. It's a great way of recording and storing information, not only by making that information visually memorable but also by generating associative thoughts. In essence it's a thinking technique which parallels the way the mind works.

"So, for example, when people have found, say, a book or an article that they think is valuable a Mind Map is a great way for them to capture and code it. They can develop their own style with their Map, they can use their own creativity and personalise it in a way that makes sense to them. Then, when they need to remember the information all they have to do is either think of their Mind Map - in which case much of the information will come back - or review it - in which case it will all be there on one page." (For more go to www.mind-mapping.co.uk)

There is no doubt that people need help with information overload but the big question is how well these techniques work. Perhaps the strongest anecdotal evidence that they do have much to offer is provided by the amount of people who now use Mind Mapping at work - from scientists and engineers to politicians and teachers. And perhaps one of the most relevant pieces of feedback from Illumine comes from their work at the CSA where a number of participants reported that, when they went home, they immediately passed on their new skills to their children. This is an acid test for trainers and learners alike. Do people take away what they learn in the 'classroom'? The answer here seems to be a resounding Yes. In fact the unspoken conclusion appears to be that the sooner we get taught these mental agility

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Excerpt from Data Smog by David Shenk: "Information used to be as rare and precious as gold ... Now it is so inexpensive and plentiful that most of it ends up being remaindered and shredded, as if it is worthless garbage. Therein lies the first great paradox ... we are becoming so information-rich that we take much of what we have for granted."

". . .almost 800 MB of [new] recorded information is produced per person each year. It would take about 30 feet of books to store the equivalent of 800 MB of information on paper".
www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/