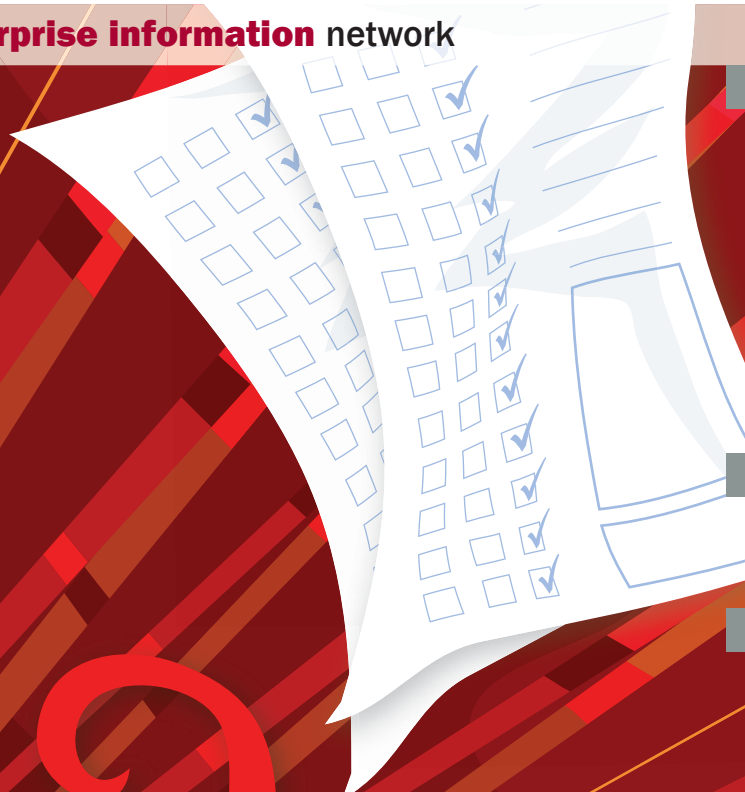


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Published by:

# Enter the information coach

To make the most of information requires talent, as with any other skill. And to make the most of that talent requires coaching.

By Guus Pijpers

People are lazy and, in most situations, will choose the path of least resistance. When it comes to information, research has consistently shown that we prefer interpersonal sources over print or electronic sources. In other words, we'd rather talk to people and use information sources and tools that are close at hand.

At the same time, many people neither read computer manuals, nor seek online help from information systems. They prefer to progress by trial and error: it requires less initial energy. Moreover, when people search for information, they decide to use it based on how easy it is to get rather than how reliable the information within may be. The result: quality may be sacrificed in order to minimise cost of acquiring additional information.

Finally, we tend to return to information sources we have used in the past in strong preference to trying out new sources of information. We are creatures of habit. If we discover a way of handling information that serves our purposes, we tend to stick with it, even if it is less than optimal.

## We are all 'information workers' now...

All this has a major impact on the workplace. Today, in almost every company, most new job recruits can be classified as information workers. Yet few people have an understanding or are sufficiently trained to deal with the intricacies and peculiarities of

information. If we expect our employees to be literate and productive with information, it is paramount we educate them more on the 'I' of 'IT'.

In particular, we need to understand the following: what do people do with information once they have it? Presumably they examine it and apply judgment to determine the next course of action. The many options open to them will be human, process and context-specific: they may use it to update previous information, or they may store it, discard it, pass it on to someone else, combine it with other information, embed it in a report, and so on.

These observable actions are collectively referred to as information behaviour. Simply put, this refers to how individuals approach and handle information, and understanding this behaviour is essential if we are to implement improvements.

The workplace has been a popular and convenient forum for studying information behaviour thus far, likely because of the potential for monetary benefits related to designing more efficient systems for

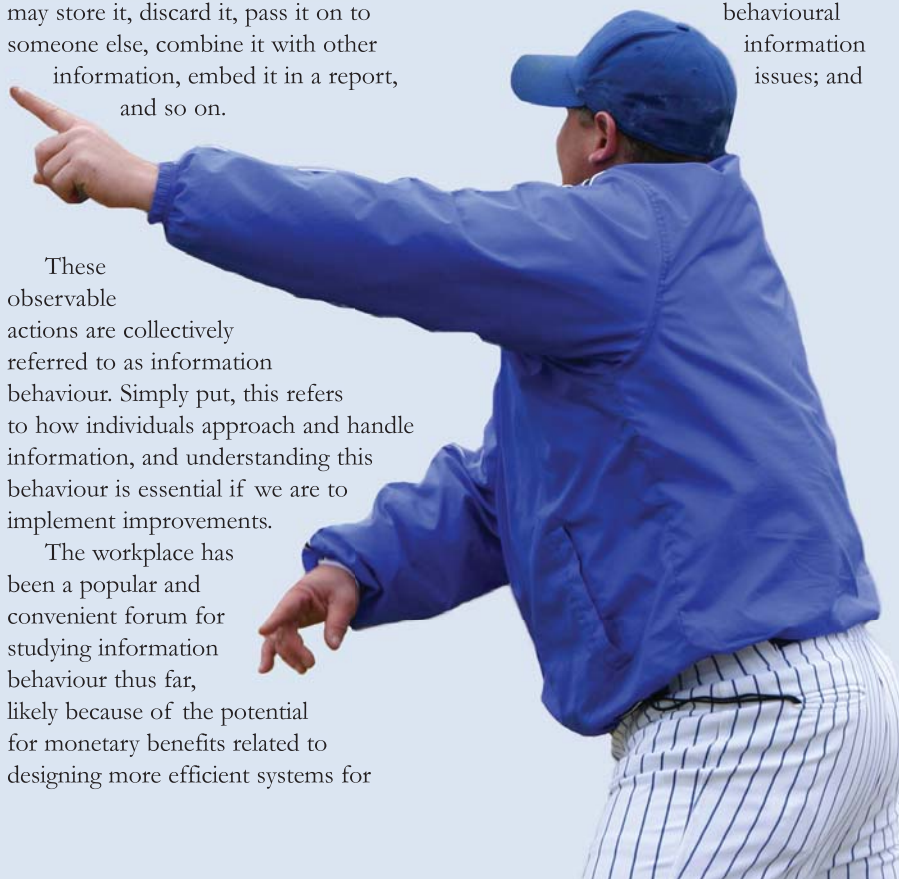
information retrieval and filtering in corporate contexts.

A major hurdle to leveraging information for competitive advantage, however, is in understanding the 'human element' of information processing. This is a significant shortcoming, because only people can leverage the value of information. Moreover, we are only now beginning to really understand that people's behaviour with regard to information is the ultimate litmus test of information productivity.

## The information coach

But a new and important information function is emerging: the information coach. The information coach helps employees understand and improve their information behaviour. They do so in three ways: first, assessing the best information environment for an organisation; second, providing assistance in helping managers and employees select the best training and support organisation for their

behavioural information issues; and



## The last word

### Information facts and figures

According to figures compiled by a wide range of information specialists:

- An average employee processes more than 75 e-mails per day, totaling some 25,000 e-mail messages per year;
- Knowledge workers spent anywhere from 25 per cent to 70 per cent of their time working with e-mail and associated attachments;
- Between 50 and 60 per cent of all business decisions are based on e-mail messages;
- Seventy-five per cent of most companies' intellectual property is contained in the messages and attachments transmitted via e-mail;
- The average employee spends 150 hours per year looking for information;
- There exists currently about five exabytes of unique information. Search engine Google would need 300 years to index this amount and is currently four days into this;
- The average American sees 16,000 advertisements, logos and labels in a day;
- The web grows by more than ten million pages every day;
- Printed content represents only 0.003 per cent of all content published annually;
- There are one billion searches on Google every day – and fewer than half in the English language;
- In 2005, 9,000 billion e-mails were sent – equivalent to about 13,000 for every online individual in the world, although much of that will have been spam;
- A typical manager reads one million words every week, equal to one and a half full-length novels.

Source: Information Usage Behaviour, by Guus Pijpers.

finally, identifying the information profile of an employee and recommending improvements they can make to become literate and productive with information.

In my experience as an information coach to executives, the single most important factor is information literacy. This is defined as a set of abilities to recognise when information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use it effectively. Only when a person recognises his own information behaviour and that of people in his or her surrounding, can he take the right steps in improving the way he acquires, analyses, and disseminates information.

Numerous measures have been developed that can help people attain

good information behaviour. There is no single tool, procedure, or technique that will correct the problem, but the effective information coach will provide training in the following areas:

#### *Information aptitude*

This refers to one's inherent ability for learning, understanding, or performing with information. A person's appropriateness with information is given at birth, although it changes with the acquisition of information skills and capabilities. Measures an information coach takes in this category relate to helping the information worker understand the reader/listener concept, their propensity to 'pile or file'

information, and the way our five senses are addressed by content.

#### *Information attitude*

This refers to the positive or negative views a person has towards information. A person's attitude influences their behaviour and changes with their experiences with, in this case, information use. Typical measures make people aware if they are, for instance, an information junkie and can help them work out what they have to know – to save them time. Ignorance may (in certain situations) be an asset.

#### *Information handling*

This refers to the ways a person may deal with information in his day-to-day activities. Obviously, how he manages and uses information is in addition to personal traits, attitudes and beliefs about information. The main measures an information coach teaches relate to concepts such as filtering, personal information management, communication and time management, information pruning and information diet.

Numerous excuses can be given why people do not want to change their information behaviour. Fear, anxiety, not being 'in the know', or simply being an information control freak are among them and providing them with more information is hardly ever a solution. Too much information, in fact, is a fundamental part of the human condition.

More attention to the people side of information is the only way to be truly productive with information – and the role of the information coach is to address this in a way that reaps positive business benefits. ■

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