

Using an Information Profile

Dr Guus Pijpers
IIP Academic Advisor
Associate Professor of Information Behavior
Managing Director Acuerdis
Riethoven, The Netherlands
ask@guuspijpers.com

13 May 2008



Abstract

The proliferation of information makes it necessary to pay more attention to the human side of information exchange. When people send out information, they often think about themselves. However, to be productive with information, any message should be aimed primarily at the receiver's characteristics. We have to make ourselves familiar with his information profile in order to exchange information effectively. As a start, one has to know his own peculiarities when dealing with information, possibly with support from an information coach.

Introduction

Only in the last century have we been able to exchange large amounts of information between two or more people. In earlier times, all communication was done in the physical presence of senders and receivers. That resulted in two major advantages: to obtain as much information as possible through our five senses and to construct a profile of the senders' information exchange characteristics.

Contemporary IT tools used for communication, such as e-mail, text messaging, chats, blogs or video sites, generally address only one or two of a person's senses. Also, given the often one-sided type of information exchange, the sender uses a medium-type and its capabilities that suit him, not per se the receiver of the message. Moreover, in most cases the recipient of transmitted information is not known, as Internet instance-usage-patterns show.

One could argue that to date hardly any reliable statistic is available with regard to the information usage behavior of any information resource. After all, if you buy a book, local newspaper, print a web page, or if you attend a presentation, there is no real knowledge about what the receiver will do with the acquired information. Yet, we all have experienced situations where our minds were changed, sometimes dramatically, by information we have received. You know intuitively that this information gives you new insight or a different look at things, which is the result of information effectively sent and accepted. If we want every piece of information we send to be accepted and used, we should begin with the receiver in mind.

Practical Solutions

More and more people work in virtual teams. It is very common that most of the team members will only meet face-to-face after a considerable time, if ever. Hence, they miss a number of advantages physical encounters provide in the exchange of information. People still like to talk to people in real life. That is what we are doing for the last million years or so. Modern technologies as telephones, webcams and other techniques, are only mediocre surrogates in this respect. Therefore, when people engage in direct, face-to-face contact it is critical that the recipient of the information remain the information sender's primary focus.

Several measures have been identified to increase the likelihood that the receiver finds the information valuable and usable. Two proven measures will be described, a person's information profile and the emergence of a new organizational function, the information coach.

Information Profile

People differ in the way they collect, analyze, and disseminate information. Yet hardly anyone uses this knowledge when they exchange information. When we communicate, regardless the format, we mainly think about ourselves. Receivers of information do not generally provide feedback to the sender when receiving unwanted information. Such feedback could help the sender disseminate information in more accurate and timely ways in the future.

An information profile serves as an aid to understand a person's information habits. An information profile is a list of a person's information characteristics. It describes the aptitude, attitude, and handling of a person with regard to information. Just as someone is described as, for example, extravert, action-oriented, or friendly, so you can elaborate on how a person deals with information.

As an example, three of the many elements of an information profile are described below.

Information junk. This refers to a person's curiosity for information. Some people collect information only for the information itself. They are never satisfied and know that most of the information gained is useless. If they only could figure out which five percent of the information was really worth having. Newsstands, CNN, RSS-feeds, coffee corners: nothing can satisfy their immense hunger for information.

Reader or listener. Evidence shows that 70% of all people are readers, whereas the remaining 30% like to receive or transmit information orally. Of course, it also depends on the type of medium, the content of the message, timing aspects, and the like. Most people are both reader and listener. They normally do both: taking notes and listening to a presentation, for example. That is a good thing: the more cues a person gets and the more senses are addressed, the better new information is kept in one's memory and available for recall. If you want to make sure the receiver understands the messages, you have to know how the addressee prefers his information.

Piler or filer. People use an array of strategies to organize all their information sources. A large number of people rely on visual displays and cues: for them the applicable adage is "out of sight, out of mind". They accumulate huge piles of documents, books, and magazines on their desk that at first sight might seem chaotic. They also have a seemingly cluttered desktop with numerous links. These users are referred to as pilers. They work best by keeping their work in sight. When they see a pile it helps them recall what is in it. Keeping their work visible also helps them keeping track of what they have to do.

Filers, on the other hand, like to structure their life by putting items of information away in an organized manner in neat closets or electronic systems. They work best when their desktop is clear of everything except what they are currently working on. What is on top of their desks provides focus for them; clutter distracts them. They keep things they are not currently working on out of sight, relying on alphabetical, numerical or other ordering systems to keep track.

Both styles - filing and piling - help people mentally organize their time, tasks and materials; each calls for a different type of workspace design. A filer is aimed at 'finding', a piler at 'reminding.'

By identifying one's information profile, you make an overview of one's deployment and use of information. It is necessary to have an understanding of the contexts in which a person seeks and uses information. And that context unfortunately changes based on time, money, or other constraints.

If one needs information rapidly, time is the key factor in deciding which information source to use. However, a second rationale of the time factor is the implicit cost/benefit analysis. Even when people know the information source, be it a person, document, or something else, they often turn to other people because of the speed with which they can get an answer. This also addresses the interactivity aspect. If the information is not precisely right, a short dialog can steer the information seeking process. Another major advantage for the information seeker is the fact that the information source can relate to his information profile. Most people have some idea what the other person wants. If they have interacted for some time already, they are familiar with the seeker's preferences and information habits. Like with our spouses, friends, or colleagues, every interaction further personalizes someone's information profile.

Successful people know that an important step in effective information behavior is to know yourself. Who else knows your information profile best? For example, do you know how much information you receive per medium, how much time you spend per medium, and if you are using the right technology in the most effective way? If one needs to change, you have to be familiar with your own way of working, and how it could be improved. To have maximum impact as information senders, we should know as much about the information profiles of our audiences as we do of our own information profiles.

Information Coach

The single most important factor in organizations nowadays is information literacy. Information literacy is defined as a set of abilities to recognize when information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use it effectively. Only when a person recognizes his own information behavior and that of people in his surrounding, can he take the right steps in improving the way he acquires, analyses, and disseminates information.

It is against this background that a new and important information function is emerging: the information coach. The information coach helps employees understand and improve their information behavior. They do so in three ways: first, assessing the best information environment for an organization; second, providing assistance in helping managers and employees selecting the best training and support organization for their behavioral information issues; and finally, identifying the information profile of an employee and recommending improvements they can make to become literate and productive with information. Quite often, an information coach uses the results of an information audit as input for his task.

One of the reasons for this new function is the dependency by more and more organizations on reliable, timely, and accurate information. An organization also has to balance compliance responsibilities with confidentiality, whereas new technologies can help by giving organizations finer-grained control over the collection, management and security of their information. Another reason is the insufficient information literacy of the average employee. New tools to manage

information require a new way of working for many information workers, yet not many have been trained in using them. The older generation is only just catching up with the tools and practices of information work today.

Numerous measures have been developed that can help people attain good information behavior. 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. An information coach can assess how the information worker understands the reader/listener concept, their propensity to 'pile or file' information, and how their 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 behavior 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 an individual may deal with information in his day-to-day activities. Obviously, how he manages and uses information relates to personal traits, attitudes and beliefs about information. The main techniques an information coach teaches about information behavior relate to concepts such as filtering, personal information management, communication and time management, information pruning and information diet.

Conclusion

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

Successful people know how to deal effectively with information. But the number of people that still need extra help and support is tremendous. The explosion of information, the transparency and openness of business environments, and the worldwide competition makes it a necessity for every person to be information literate.

Effective people know they are not being paid to show up at work for eight hours a day. They know their employer pays them to analyze data and make critical judgments about information that adds value to the enterprise. By combining information, people, technologies, and business opportunities, they come up with new ideas and improved ways of working.

Improvements in information productivity can only be gained by paying more attention to the people-side of information. It 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. The

definition of an information profile is part of a toolbox to help people at work and at home deal with information in more productive effective ways.

References

Case, D.O. (2002). *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Pijpers, A.G.M. (2006). *Information Usage Behavior – Theory and Practice*. Den Haag: Academic Service.

Pijpers, A.G.M. (2007). *On an Information Diet – Towards a Better Use of Information (Dutch: Op informatiedieet – Naar een beter gebruik van informatie)*. Amsterdam: Business Contact.

Spink, A. & C. Cole (2006) (Eds.). *New directions in human information behavior*. Dordrecht: Springer.

About the Author

Dr Guus Pijpers is founder and Managing Director of Acuerdis, the Netherlands. He has advanced knowledge and expertise in the practical use of information at senior executive level. His research activities and publications on information behavior have been widely recognized as leading in the field.

Previously Guus Pijpers worked as Chief Information Officer at Philips Electronics and as Corporate Information Manager at Akzo Nobel .

Guus Pijpers is author of a large number of articles, published in renowned journals and magazines. His latest books are entitled *Information Usage Behavior – Theory and Practice* (2006) and *On an Information Diet – Towards a Better Use of Information* (2007).

Dr Guus Pijpers received his Ph.D. in Management Science and Computer Science from Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. He holds a Master's Degree in Management Science and a Master's Degree in Computer Science from the Open University of the Netherlands. He is a certified IT-auditor. He has gained an Executive MBA at Krannert School of Management, Purdue University, West-Lafayette, Indiana, USA. He also received an Executive MBA of TiasNimbas Business School, Tilburg, the Netherlands.

Guus Pijpers is Associate Professor of Information Behavior at TiasNimbas Business School, Tilburg, the Netherlands.

About The Institute for Innovation & Information Productivity (IIIP)

The techniques for measuring performance today, from factory floors to the delivery of services to the outcomes of innovation, often fall short because they do not consider the value of new technology or provide meaningful indicators to determine tradeoffs among multiple investments. The Institute for Innovation & Information Productivity was formed in 2006 to break through outmoded, industrial-age biases and redefine knowledge economy measurements for individuals, teams, firms and nations. The IIIP develops new measurements and best practices to better understand the factors affecting business and organizational performance, studies the impact of technology, and encourages a global dialogue on improving operational results.

The IIIP is a mutual benefit, nonprofit corporation. The membership and focus are global; the headquarters are located in San Francisco, California, USA. The Institute is governed by an elected board of directors, who are representatives of member companies.

Institute for Innovation & Information Productivity
Presidio of San Francisco
P.O. Box 29920 • 572 B Ruger Street
San Francisco, CA 94129-0920
USA
<http://www.iii-p.org>
Tel: +1.415.561.6275
Fax: +1.415.561.6120
Send inquiries to: LoBue@iii-p.org

Copyright 2008, Guus Pijpers. All rights reserved.
Posted by the IIIP with permission from the author.
For a copy of this paper, or other IIIP material, please visit www.iii-p.org.