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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
March 19, 2013

Forbes

How to Manage the Information Avalanche

Not too long ago, I heard newscaster [Tom Brokaw](#) respond to what seemed like an obvious question: "Did today's ubiquitous availability of information make it easier for people to be informed?" After all, when Brokaw began his career in the 1960's, most people learned about current events via newspapers, radio reports, or the evening news on TV. Now [we are inundated](#) with information from these sources, as well as continuous cable broadcasts, mobile alerts, automatic web search notifications, blog posts, twitter feeds, and more. People today *must* be more informed.

But Brokaw's observation was that more information doesn't necessarily bring more understanding. In fact, his view was that all the available information means people have to work harder to consume it: categorizing information, sorting facts from opinions, and putting everything in context. Unless we take the time to do that, and have the skills to do it well, we could actually be less knowledgeable.

This ability to synthesize overwhelming amounts of information isn't only a challenge in public affairs and politics – it's also an increasing problem in organizations. For example, a division president for a consumer products company recently told me about dozens of reports that she and her team have to sort through every week in order to see how the business is doing. By the time they get an aligned picture of performance, it's too late to take action. Similarly, in a technology firm, the leadership team described getting inputs from so many sources that they often could only react to what they learned last, rather than seeing trends or distinguishing reliable sources from one-off complaints.

Business information has exploded at all levels. More importantly, it no longer flows to decision-makers in a predictable, controlled fashion. Not long ago, senior leaders received well-scrubbed financial reports and had regular patterns for reviewing performance, plans, strategies, etc. If anything, they didn't get enough direct data. Now, most leaders not only receive the official reports, but also: a constant stream of emails directly from the field and from customers, internet-based data about markets and competitors, observations from colleagues, and more. It's a [data free-for-all](#).

All managers can (and need to) step up to a higher level of information discipline. These five steps can help control that information avalanche, wherever it flows from:

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1. **Instead of trying to absorb everything, focus on a few key indicators.** For short-term performance, look for leading instead of lagging indicators. Make sure that they give you a basis for taking action.
2. **Differentiate opinion from data.** Remember that different people can observe the same event and interpret it based on their own (sometimes unconscious) bias or agenda.
3. **Examine trends and patterns.** This means not only looking at indicators over time, but also examining their sources and how they may be changing.
4. **Periodically look at the ecosystem.** Since information flows from everywhere, occasionally take the time to map out where data is coming from and what it says. This will show you if certain data sources are becoming dominant or just "noisy"; or if other key constituencies are not providing any input.
5. **Use information as a basis for dialogue.** Interpreting information requires people with different filters, analytical tools, and perspectives. Take advantage of your team and other resources to sort through the information so that you'll have a richer foundation for making decisions.

Today's technology gives us access to more information than ever before. However, as Tom Brokaw suggests, turning that information into a meaningful basis for making decisions requires a great deal of hard work.

How do you manage the information avalanche?

Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
http://www.forbes.com/sites/ronashkenas/2013/03/11/if-you-have-to-fire-an-employee-heres-how-to-do-it-right/

Editor's Note: A version of this blog was cross-posted on HBR.org.