Gartner Research

Communications Leaders' Guide to Reducing Information Overload

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ID G00787532 - 7 min read

By Analyst(s): Communications Research Team

Initiatives: Internal Communications; Communications Strategy and Functional Leadership; Communications Technology, Content and Channels; Employee Communications

> Information overload is a pervasive problem that negatively affects both employee and business performance. Communications leaders can use this research collection to understand the challenges and strategies needed to reduce information overload.
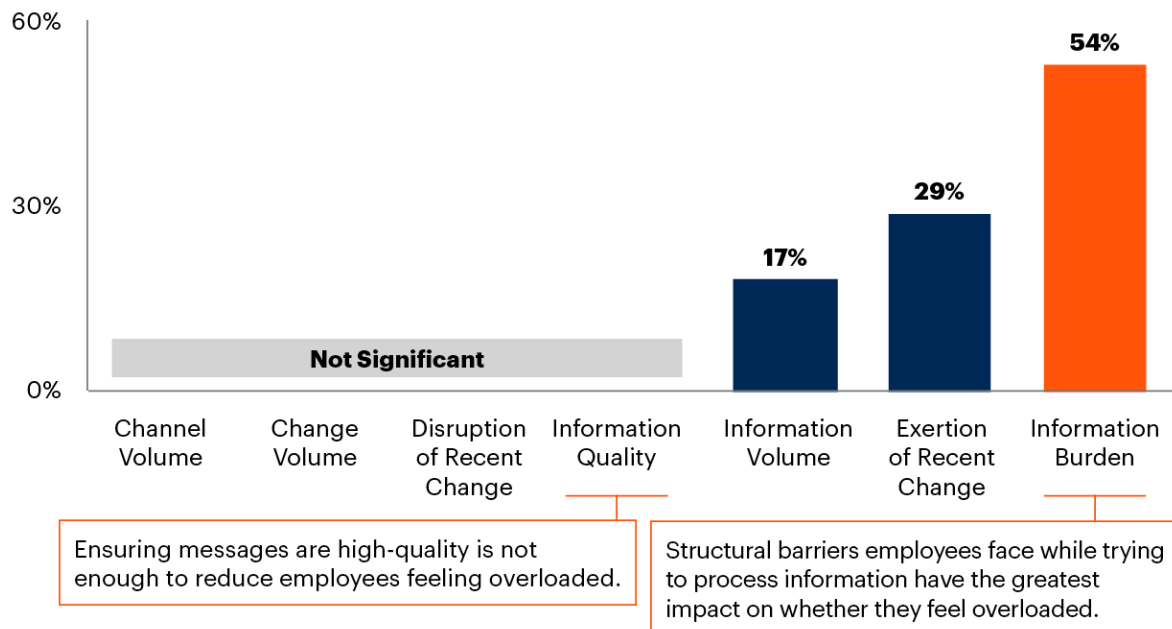
Analysis

Understanding Information Overload

Information overload occurs when employees feel overwhelmed, defeated and energy-depleted by information flows at work. [1] Although information volume and the impacts of organizational change are partially responsible, the chief cause is information burden: the degree to which employees struggle with duplicative, effort-intensive, inconsistent and irrelevant information (see Figure 1). Due to its pervasiveness among workers at all levels and its negative effect on strategic alignment and intent to stay, [1] information overload has become a critical challenge for Communications leaders.

Figure 1: Information Factors' Impacts on Overload

Information Factors' Impacts on Overload
Percent Increase in Feeling Overloaded When Moving From Low to High
on Each Driver

Ensuring messages are high-quality is not enough to reduce employees feeling overloaded.

Structural barriers employees face while trying to process information have the greatest impact on whether they feel overloaded.

n = 988 employees and managers

Source: 2022 Gartner Communications Workforce Survey

Note: Multiple regression model with controls for employee age, gender, region, level of education, regional location, job satisfaction, manager efficacy, role, organization and role tenure, on-site/hybrid/remote status, industry, organization size and type of recent change experienced. Driver impact calculated as the percent increase in Feeling Overloaded index as a function of model values at -1SD and +1SD from the mean on each respective driver.

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Addressing Information Overload Is Challenging

Communications has not traditionally been assigned a clear mandate to help employees manage incoming information, which has frustrated the development of an effective, cohesive overload reduction strategy. Several factors have further complicated the task of reducing information burden:

- Employees at all levels, from frontline to leadership, do not fully recognize their own contribution to the overloaded information environment.

- Democratized access to broadcast messaging platforms allows burdensome information to spread unchecked.

- Growing demands for transparency from employees create dilemmas for communicators seeking to cut down on message volume.

- The proliferation of employee communication channels increases the total volume of messages while making it more difficult for employees to know where to look for critical information.

How to Reduce Information Overload

Communications leaders can use several strategies to effectively address the root causes of overload:

- Get visibility into the problem using journey mapping and channel audits.

- Set accountability at the top by communicating the impact of information burden and forming a coalition to govern your shared strategy.

- Reinforce positive communication behaviors to reduce employee contributions to overload.

- Provide guidance for navigating and prioritizing channels to cut through the noise caused by channel proliferation.

- Augment strategy with productivity tools to manage attention, personalize experiences and aid in finding key information.

Research Highlights

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Understand the Sources of and Solutions for Information Overload

What is my role in reducing information overload for my organization?

Streamlining and improving central communications is insufficient for mitigating overload as it fails to address the main cause: information burden. Use this research to understand how to work with partners and employees to reduce the experiential burden of information overload and the extent of its business impact.

▶ Reducing Information Overload

(For a webinar presentation of these findings, see Best Practices for Managing Information Overload)

Why does information overload feel different now than it used to?

Interviews with Communications leaders reveal that three fundamental shifts in how information flows through organizations are changing the nature of information overload. This research explores how these three shifts — channel proliferation, information insecurity and capability mismatch — will dominate internal Communications strategy for the next several years and identifies what communicators can do to address them.

▶ Information Overload and the Future of Internal Communications

How can I help employees improve their communication habits?

Employees' communications can contribute to their peers' sense of information overload. This research outlines how you can shape norms for employee communication practices by reinforcing positive behaviors and sharing channel guidance.

▶ Improve Employee Communication With Behavior Reinforcement and Channel Guidance

How can technology help me address information overload?

Although technology alone cannot fully address information overload, three types of productivity tools can help reduce it. This research outlines how attention management tools, personalization platforms and finding aids can address different components of information burden.

▶ Quick Answer: How Productivity Tools Reduce Information Overload

How can I better understand the employee information experience at my organization?

Understanding where, in the digital experience, employees feel most overloaded is an essential part of building a successful information overload strategy. This research shows how to draft journey maps for key digital employee experiences. It also helps identify areas of digital friction caused by a siloed or incomplete information environment and provides directions for both near- and long-term solutions.

▶ Communications Tool: Digital Employee Experience Journey Maps

Educate and Collaborate With Leaders Across Your Organization

How can I convince leaders to prioritize reducing information overload?

It can be challenging to quantify the impact of information overload in a way that is easily understood. Use this presentation to demonstrate the cost of information overload to senior leadership.

▶ Business Case for Reducing Information Overload

What can I do about leaders and managers being overloaded themselves?

All employees are experiencing information overload, but leaders and managers are especially impacted. [1] This research features recent data showing the problem of information overload for leaders and managers, and examples of best practices for addressing it. Share this presentation with key stakeholders to make the case for reducing overload for leaders and managers.

▶ Share Leader and Manager Information Overload Data With Stakeholders

How can I reduce the volume of top-down messages that employees receive?

Amid volatile, complex and ambiguous environments, business leaders across the enterprise feel pressure to share urgent and competing business priorities. Learn how The Home Depot sensitized cross-functional leadership groups to the problem of information overload and garnered their commitment to be a part of the solution.

▶ How to Reduce Message Burden With a Cross-Functional Gatekeeping Team

How can I work with other functions to improve the employee information experience?

Siloed intranet ownership makes it difficult to create a sustainable, easy to navigate and up-to-date platform. This research explains how New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment (NSW DPE) adopted a user-centric focus of intranet governance.

▶ Case Study: User-Centric Intranet Governance Improves Employee Experience

Reinforce Low-Burden Employee Communication Behaviors (Even Among Nonwired Workforces)

How can I get employees to commit to better communication etiquette?

Peer-to-peer channels are some of the most frequently used channels at work. Use this research to understand how to use education, a pledge and peer reinforcement to have employees consider how their own behaviors contribute to information overload. Learn how Anthem launched a persona-driven email campaign to raise awareness and provide guidance for addressing negative communication behaviors.

▶ How to Reduce Employee Contributions to Message Overload With Efficiency Commitment

How can I convince wired employees to stop using jargon and acronyms?

Complex communication containing jargon and acronyms makes it challenging for employees to understand peers and leaders. Learn how FWD Group's Jargon Awareness Campaign introduced and reinforced new norms for clear communication in its organizations.

▶ Case Study: Employee Clear Communication Campaign

How can I reduce information overload for a nonwired workforce?

While information overload may be associated primarily with wired employees, nearly 20% of nonwired employees report feeling overloaded. [1] Use this presentation to understand what causes overload and how to intervene for nonwired workers.

▶ Reducing Information Overload for Nonwired Employees

How can I set a channel and content approach that will engage nonwired workers?
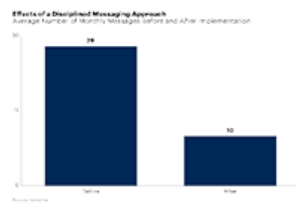
To reduce burdensome messaging and better engage nonwired workers, leaders at Valvoline adopted a disciplined approach to employee messaging. Learn how channel and cadence simplification can be used to continually engage the hard-to-reach employee groups with both regular and urgent communications.

▶ Disciplined Messaging Approach (Valvoline)

How should I design safety campaigns for workplace risk factors that are mental, not physical?

Safety awareness campaigns that remind nonwired workforces of physical workplace risks and countermeasures are insufficient for overcoming the invisible hazards of distraction. Read how Communications leaders at International Paper boosted awareness of the safety risks of distraction using a toolkit for frontline leaders and group-based reflections.

▶ Case Study: Distraction Minimization Toolkit for Frontline Safety

Provide Channel Guidance to Optimize the Employee Information Experience

How do I select the best channel for a given goal or task?

Communicating to improve employee performance requires optimizing a mix of channels. This research highlights which communications channels employees find most effective for receiving different kinds of messages so you can select the best channel for a given goal.

▶ Optimizing Your Channel Mix to Boost Employee Performance

How do I design an effective channel guide for employees?

When employees use channels according to individual preferences, they can easily feel overwhelmed and confused about how to find and share information. Use this research to understand how channel guides teach employees how to use channels and collaboration platforms, and reduce information overload.

▶ Employee Channel Guide Library

How do I effectively measure and analyze channel performance?

Communications leaders must understand which channels are most effective to engage employees and reduce overload. Use this step-by-step guide to scope, conduct and analyze a channel audit survey to gain insight into channel usage.

▶ Ignition Guide to Conducting an Internal Communications Channel Audit Survey

Evidence

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