

Less is more

"Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much."

Robert Greenleaf, ATT

As people are being increasingly bombarded with more information than they can handle and suffering the effects of information overload, we need to discover the art of doing less.

Technological advances have made it easier to gather and distribute information through a greater array of channels. The natural selection processes that would have kept all but the most important information from being distributed have gone and we are not replacing them with our own controls.

Not only has the volume of information distributed gone up, but also we have got lazy about the quality of what we send. We spend insufficient time processing and preparing raw *information* to ensure that it is effective *communication*. David Shenk, author of a 1997 book on the subject, called the abundance of low quality information that we mistake for communication (or knowledge) "data smog". It renders us unable to see what is important. As he puts it, it "makes us numb to anything that doesn't lurch out and grab us by the throat".

People are being paralysed by the amount of information they are expected to process. It is causing stress, wasting resources and slowing down decision-making. So, rather than making our own and everyone else's job harder, isn't it about time that we tried to say less and to go for quality over quantity?

Some definitions:

- Data – raw facts and figures.
- Information – data organised into a meaningful context.
- Knowledge – information that has been understood and applied.
- Information overload – having more information than you can process effectively.
- Information Fatigue Syndrome – the effects of information overload, including the inability to make decisions or take action.
- Data smog/Dataglut/Infobog – the overabundance of low quality information that pollutes daily life.
- Non-information – poor quality data that lacks relevance and usefulness.

Developing the art of doing less

The onus is on those of us with something to communicate to put in the skills and effort required to get the message across effectively. Below are 10 suggestions for how to reduce the quantity and improve the quality of your communication at a macro and micro level:

1. Tailor for different audiences

Give specific groups of people information suited to their needs and interests. Give them "permission not to know" the other stuff.

2. Allow information to be "pulled"

You don't have to "push" all information by sending it direct in all its detail to everyone. Let people know where it is available if they want it.

3. Prioritise

Don't send the less important information and, when you have decided what to send, put the most important points first.

4. Be succinct

It takes longer, but it is worth the effort to say what you want to say in fewer words.

5. Organise

It is more important to know where and how to find what you need to know than to have everything provided on a plate.

6. Remove waste

Carry out an audit to review the communication channels and materials you are using to find duplication and waste of effort.

7. Have a clear out

See if you can throw away/delete anything that is out of date (manuals, phone books, Intranet pages etc) and encourage others to do the same.

8. Provide email guidelines

Email is increasingly the most complained about and misused communication channel. Advise people on how best to use it.

9. Make links

Integrate messages, initiatives etc to create a single whole that can be easily digested.

10. Tell the truth

If you don't know, or you don't know yet, say you don't know. This takes less time, energy and words than inventing something to cover up.

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Zero-21 in a consultancy that improves what and how you communicate – enabling you to bring your ideas to life and get the results you want. The person behind Zero-21 is Lynn Fraser, a writer and communication consultant with over 15 years' experience in corporate identity, marketing, selling, internal communication and training.



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