



by Jill Gilbert

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Too Much Information, Too Little Time

Have you ever found yourself out of the office for a series of meetings, your BlackBerry buzzing the entire time, but you are unable to respond to your messages? Then you return to the office and find that 60 new e-mails wait in your inbox. You respond to a few critical e-mails and ignore the rest—for now. You log on to the company's intranet for the latest environment, health, and safety (EH&S) statistics, then open a few Excel spreadsheets to review some calculations. And you only scratch the surface. At the end of the day, with so many sources of data to digest in a short time, you try to steal a few minutes of "quiet time" to react to the hundreds of e-mails that now clog your inbox. You go to sleep, exhausted from information overload. Don't worry—tomorrow's another day, and the cycle starts anew.

Information Overload Saps Productivity

21st century technology allows us 24/7 access to data and a myriad of ways to access it. We find ourselves tethered to several portable devices—at a recent seminar, one of the attendees I noted had a smart phone, tablet computer, and notebook computer. Some of us also have access to business-related blogs, tweets, and social networks.

We cannot seem to escape being bombarded by data. We fool ourselves into thinking that multitasking is the answer and we end up doing several things halfheartedly rather than one thing to completion. A barrage of information and multitasking renders us unable to pay attention to important tasks.

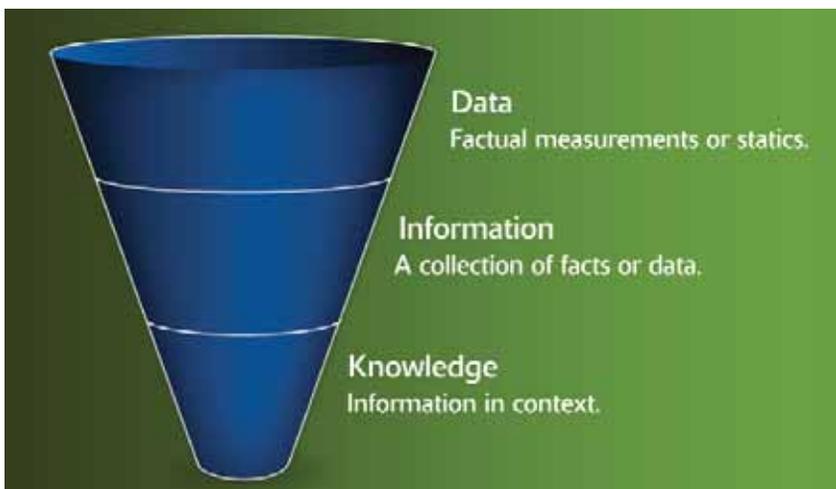
Data, Information, and Knowledge

Data are often viewed as the lowest level of

abstraction from which information and then knowledge are derived. Data are factual information (measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation; information in numerical form that can be digitally transmitted or processed. *Information* is the summarization of data; a collection of facts or data.

Different theories state that *knowledge* involves complex cognitive processes: perception, learning, communication, association, and reasoning. The term knowledge is also used to mean the confident understanding of a subject with the ability to use it for a specific purpose. Thus, knowledge means taking disparate data, turning it into information and adding context to generate knowledge. Many organizations do a good job of managing data, but fall short when attempting to convert it into information and knowledge (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Raw data must make the transformation to information, and then knowledge, to be useful.



Applications, Applications Everywhere... and Not Much Time to Think

Enterprise software vendors and smart phone vendors develop applications for just about anything you can imagine. If you want to know the outside temperature, just use your phone app. During a recent business trip, I was appalled to learn that the temperature was -17 °F. I knew that it was freakishly cold, but sometimes it is better not to know. If you want to know how many e-mail messages you have, use a Windows 7 desktop "widget" to display message statistics without opening Outlook. If you want to know your facility's environmental incident

rate vs. other facilities, just log onto your EH&S management information system and look at your dashboard.

As executives and professionals, we need to synthesize information from many different sources, evaluate pluses and minuses, apply judgment, and make decisions. We need time to think.

Just because there's an application, it does not mean that it's necessary or useful. Back in the days of Microsoft's Disk Operating System (DOS) for PCs, there were hundreds of add-on utilities. We have come full circle, with thousands of applications and add-ons available in the marketplace. Using multiple applications and add-ons makes operating systems "buggy" and less secure, more vulnerable to hackers.

Likewise, stretching your EH&S applications over several platforms makes you more susceptible to security issues. It is difficult to find a single application suite that addresses all EH&S issues. Large enterprises often use several EH&S applications, for example, one for safety issues like process hazard

analysis, another to manage material safety data sheets, and one for everything else, from audits and action item tracking to air, water, and waste compliance management.

It does not matter if all of your EH&S information sits within one database. The software end-user does not need to know or care how data are stored, as long as s/he can get the right information, at the right level of detail, with minimal effort, when needed to make timely decisions. Data warehouses and business intelligence (reporting and graphical display) software help make access to information seamless.

There are too many applications for us to learn, and too many places for us to retrieve information. This is a good case for standardizing business processes and centralizing information, so that we have knowledge to make us and our organizations agile. Truly useful information technology focuses on rewards to the end-user. If you cannot make a real-world case that a new technology will improve the productivity of the end-user, than that technology does not add value. **em**