PERSONAL INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Also by Peter Thomas

The Social and Interactional Dimensions of Human–Computer Interfaces
CSCW Requirements and Evaluation
Personal Information Systems: Business Applications

**PERSONAL
INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT
TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES
FOR ACHIEVING
PROFESSIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS**

**BARBARA ETZEL
AND
PETER THOMAS**

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10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
05	04	03	02	01	00	99	98	97	96

Contents

List of figures and tables viii

Preface x

Acknowledgements xiii

- 1 From the industrial age to the information age 1**
 - The modern executive 3
 - Information, technology and new ways of doing business 4
 - Understanding how to achieve effectiveness 5
 - Investing time in technology 5
 - Is productivity increasing or decreasing? 6
 - Tools for time and information management 7
- 2 Personal information management 8**
 - 'Personal' 8
 - 'Information' 8
 - 'Management' 10
 - A new skill: personal information management 10
 - Personal information management: tools and techniques for achieving professional effectiveness 14
 - Some general principles 15
 - About the rest of this book 16
- 3 The eight key information actions 18**
 - What is information? 18
 - Why do we need information? 19
 - What do we do with information? 19
 - Eight key information actions 20
 - Some other perspectives on information 22
- 4 'Information overload' and information management**
 - 're-engineering' 25**
 - Information overload 25
 - Changing (or 're-engineering') your approach to information management 26
 - 'Information re-engineering goals' and their benefits 27
 - Related re-engineering techniques: time management, conceptual tools and thinking 29

5	Understanding information management technology	32
	A framework for information management technologies: the 'five technology potentials'	34
6	Personal information technologies: advantages and disadvantages	37
	How to choose personal information products	37
	How information is stored and managed	38
7	Computer software and hardware products	43
	Spreadsheets	44
	Accounting software	46
	Billing software	47
	Word processing	48
	Databases	50
	Personal organisers/personal information managers (PIMs)	53
	E-mail programs	54
	Tracking and storage packages	56
	How to choose your software program: summary	57
	Computer hardware devices	58
	Personal digital assistants (PDAs)	59
	CD-Rom	61
	Computer back-up systems	62
	Scanning devices	63
	Telecommunications	64
	Why are computers so difficult to use?	66
	How to make using a computer easier	69
	Other computer issues	70
8	Paper-based information products	72
	Categories of paper-based information	72
	Operating requirements	73
	Administrative requirements	77
	Fiscal requirements	78
	Legal requirements	78
	Historical requirements	78
9	Your personal information management strategy	79
	Producing and implementing your own personal information management strategy	80
	Benefits of a PIM strategy	84
	Roadblocks to effective personal information management	85
	Reasons that prompt the implementation of a PIM strategy	94

10	Beginning to implement your personal information management strategy	95
	The macro approach	95
	The micro approach	96
	Scenario: an architect implementing his personal information management strategy	97
11	Maintaining your personal information management strategy	109
	File audit	109 110
	Completion	110
	Ten-second filing operation	110
	Learn to make split-second decisions	111
	'I'll do it later'	111
	Create your conceptual tools	111
	Re-engineer your information management	112
	Managing daily information flow	112
12	Computing technology and your personal information management strategy	116
	How to manage information in the computer	117
	Innovative computer-based personal information management strategies	120
	A personal information management strategy not using a computer	122
13	Conclusions	125
	Technology and change	125
	'Techno trends'	126
	Predicting technologies	128
	Preventing information build-up	129
	Some real problems	131
	Summary	132
	<i>Appendix 1 Key issues in personal information management</i>	135
	<i>Appendix 2 Personal information management products</i>	137
	<i>References</i>	147
	<i>Index</i>	150

List of figures and tables

■ Figures

- 3.1 The eight key information actions 21
- 9.1 The importance of information 23
- 13.1 Technology life cycles 129
- 13.2 Problems that affect a successful, productive and organised life and career 133

■ Tables

- 4.1 The time-management marix 30
- 5.1 A range of information management technologies 33
- 5.2 Technologies and the eight key information actions 35
- 5.3 The five technology potentials 36
- 7.1 Spreadsheets: information storage or production? 45
- 7.2 Do you really need a spreadsheet? 45
- 7.3 Accounting packages: information storage or production? 46
- 7.4 Accounting packages: do you really need one? 47
- 7.5 Billing packages: information storage or production? 48
- 7.6 Do you really need a billing package? 48
- 7.7 Word processors: information storage or production? 49
- 7.8 Word processors: do you really need one? 49
- 7.9 Preformatted databases: information storage or production? 51
- 7.10 Do you really need a preformatted database? 51
- 7.11 Non-preformatted databases: information storage or production? 52
- 7.12 Do you really need a non-preformatted database? 52
- 7.13 Personal organiser: information storage or production? 53
- 7.14 Do you really need a personal organiser? 54
- 7.15 E-mail: information storage or production? 55
- 7.16 Do you really need an e-mail system? 56
- 7.17 Tracking and storage packages: information storage or production? 57
- 7.18 Do you really need a tracking and storage program? 57
- 7.19 PDAs: information storage or production? 60
- 7.20 Do you really need a PDA? 60
- 7.21 CD-Rom: information storage or production? 61

7.22	Do you need a CD-Rom?	62
7.23	Scanners: information storage or production?	64
7.24	Do you really need a scanner?	64
9.1	PIM strategy development chart	80
9.2	PIM strategy benefits questionnaire	86

■ Preface

No matter how much times change, events tend to repeat themselves. For example, when the telephone was first introduced, it was used and initially promoted as a 'telegraph' – an instantly familiar technology – and users had subsequently to be educated about the concept of 'the telephone' and how it could be used. In 1907, half of the telephones in the USA were owned by companies other than AT&T. That meant consumers had to pay bills to several different phone companies to be able to reach subscribers on a different system (Lubar, 1993, pp.127–31). Another example is the phonograph. The basic phonograph design was constantly being improved by Thomas Edison and his employees in the 1880s and 1890s. A phonograph that sold for \$100 in 1896 dropped to \$20 in 1897 and to \$10 for a stripped-down machine in 1899 (Lubar, 1993, p.172).

Technological advances were also blamed for the ills of society. New methods to set type, cheaper paper production from wood pulp and better presses helped increase the availability and affordability of newspapers and books. Leading thinkers and social critics condemned the changes caused by 'loss of innocence' and the rapid pace of change. George Beard, an American doctor and social critic, listed the telegraph and the newspaper among the five causes of 'nervousness', a pernicious disease he thought characterised Americans at the end of the nineteenth century (Lubar, 1993, p.33).

Now look at the situation today. 'Social ills' and in particular stress are just as prevalent today as they were at the beginning of the twentieth century. Information flooding at us from numerous sources, stress and being too busy are all problems that people complain of today. And, as with the phonograph and the modern printing press, these problems are often blamed on technology. A further parallel is rapid decreases in prices of technology – and even faster increases in power, particularly in the computing industry. By the time you are reading this, the new, top of the line 125mHz Pentium computer with a massive hard disk will probably be easily surpassed by something faster, better and frustratingly less expensive. Finally, many customers are again paying more than one phone bill. They have different bills for their fax, mobile, pager and telephone lines, even though it is all communications technology. And, particularly in the USA, competition for a long distance phone service has led to frequent switching between carriers in order to get the best deal.

So has anything really changed in the last 100 years, or have we just forgotten the lessons and experiences of previous generations? One important distinction exists to explain what is going on today. Technological advances 100 years ago benefited only the wealthy and the literate – a small portion of the population.

Today almost everyone can afford to purchase information and new technology. Even at the rapidly decreasing price of \$20, a phonograph was well beyond the financial grasp of most people; today computers costing £1000 are affordable for many people.

We find ourselves again in the midst of a technological and information revolution. The benefits to be gained from the use of technology are enormous but the issues and problems that must be addressed before individual users can take full advantage of these benefits may be daunting. For example, many people can afford, and have already signed up with, services providing connections to 'on-line' information services or to the 'Internet'. However, the gulf between the advantages of the Internet and the reality of not being able to connect (your modem refuses to work, the system won't accept your password, you have the wrong shape telephone plug) or understand its operation (how do I get this to print?) is very wide. Even for those experiencing few technical problems, the issue may become one of what to do with all of the wonderful information you have downloaded – where do you store it?

Even with technological advances, familiar problems still remain. We are still looking for lost paper documents and wondering where we put that file. Instead of eliminating paper in the office, technology can be argued to have had the opposite effect. The amount of paper has increased drastically, with no decrease in sight: in 1992 in the USA businesses generated over 2.5 trillion pieces of paper (Lubar, 1993, p.37). And more arrives each day, making the term 'information overload' a grim reality.

Seeking answers, many people have looked towards what has come to be known as 'time management'. Time management techniques provide valuable assistance to professionals wanting to pack more into their working day, but many are beginning to find that true personal effectiveness requires more than just 'managing time'. While people have been busy using methods for successfully managing their time, there has been a steady build-up of papers, electronic mail and reading materials that are constantly arriving and demanding attention. And the new tools that promise to make work easier are, mostly, computer-based. Before we can *save* time, we must *spend* time learning how to use the computer. We also must set up a system to manage our paper-based information which, despite the availability of technology, often piles up.

There is little time available to learn these new techniques. Indeed everything must be accomplished quickly. The pressure is increasing for professionals to become more effective, achieve better results faster, and be more flexible and versatile than ever before. The problem that faces many professionals is how to achieve these results – to use information resources effectively and save time. This describes the core issues professionals are dealing with and points towards the skill needed to resolve the situation – what we call in this book *personal information management*. We would like to convince you that what the phrase 'time management' signified for the 1980s, 'personal information management' signifies for the 1990s and beyond.

The issues of 'information overload', the links between new and old technologies,

the hidden problems of new technologies and new ways of managing information are the things we talk about in this book, and the things we will help you understand and deal with effectively.

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All errors and omissions which remain are of course our responsibility.

B.E.
P.T.