



# Whitaker Institute Policy Brief Series

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**Cluster:** Agile and Open Innovation (Lero)

**Theme:** Public-Sector Innovation and Reform

**Further Reading:** Whelan, E. and Teigland, R. (2013) "[Transactive memory systems as a collective filter for mitigating information overload in digitally enabled organizational groups](#)". *Information and Organization*, 23, 177-197.

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**Read More About:** [Agile and Open Innovation \(Lero\)](#) within the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change

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## Information and Communication Overload in the Workplace

Due to the novelty of social media technologies, and our experiences using them, research is only beginning to unveil how the hours dedicated to online interactions are impacting human behaviour. Enterprise social media (ESM) platforms such as Jive, Chatter, and Yammer are akin to the public Facebook but are employed for internal communication and social interaction within the enterprise. One of the many challenges knowledge workers now face is the amount of ESM communications they are expected to deal with. Information overload is the undesirable condition that occurs when the information to be assimilated exceeds one's information processing capacity, leading to lost productivity and quality of life. In our technology saturated workplaces, the information overload problem will only amplify unless we generate creative solutions. To do so, we first need to understand the actual antecedents to the information overload predicament.

### Research Findings

We conducted 23 in depth interviews with management consultants, from business analysts up to senior consultants. Management consultants were selected as they spend a large amount of time assembling, analysing, and assessing information gathered from various sources to fully understand and solve clients' problems. The interviews revealed the information burden in the workplace is much more nuanced than previously thought. Firstly, the majority of interviewees (n=17) reported regularly feeling stressed and clouded due to masses of content they are exposed to through ESM platforms. Secondly, the problem is not so much information overload, but communication overload, i.e. responding to the vast diversity of communication initiated by a third party. As one interviewee explained: "*Typically a barrage of very varied messages come in. One minute you're responding to an email about a client, the next minute it's a snapchat discussion about a new technology, the next it's a Chatter post on an internal team problem. It's the constant switching I find draining.*" Thirdly, a small number of consultants reported no adverse effects from the deluge of communications, even though they are heavy ESM users. These few 'power users' would seem to have the cognitive abilities to eschew communication overload. A follow up study will focus on identifying exactly what these cognitive skills are.

### Policy Implications

The French Government recently introduced the "right to disconnect" law to protect workers from information overload and other nefarious impacts of modern communication technologies. Under the law, French companies must specify the hours when employees are not supposed to send or receive email. Such a policy in Ireland should be part of a multipronged approach to reducing the communication loads placed on workers. Organisations should follow the example of Volkswagen and Daimler who have introduced policies to reduce the informational burden on employees. Volkswagen's policy is to shut down its email servers after hours while Daimler employees are free to delete all messages they receive while on vacation. Such policies will not only preserve employee quality of life, but as proven in a multitude of studies, less stressed employees are more productive, more creative, and make better decisions.