Keeping current, keeping sane!

A Web tutorial for coping with information overload

by Constance Rinaldo and Karen Odato

Information overload is a common complaint among faculty, researchers, and clinicians. The combination of the transition to electronic information and Web technology has exacerbated feelings of being overwhelmed by information. "Keeping Current, Keeping Sane" was conceived when a new member of the pediatrics department stated during a library tour, "I just want to stay current and keep my sanity. I want to have a life!" In response to this and other pleas for help from users of the Biomedical Libraries at Dartmouth College, we planned a workshop focusing on ways to make information-gathering and filtering efficient, cost-effective, and manageable. The idea was to bring together tricks, techniques, and strategies that we, as librarians, find useful for coping with information overload.

Identifying the key problems

During the planning process, we identified the key problems users have in locating and organizing information. We also identified as many types of information management tools and ideas as we could by brainstorming within the library staff and asking users for ideas. Examples of the types of problems and tools identified include:
- paper and electronic reprint management;
- URL management and organization;
- use of paper and electronic table of contents services;
- identification of science and medicine news update services;
- current awareness services ("SDIs");
- interlibrary lending;
- photocopy services;
- electronic journals;
- library workshops specific to a particular problem;
- links to handouts and supplementary materials from library workshops;
- tools to evaluate Internet sources;
- efficient exploration and searching of Internet resources; and
- reasons to ask librarians to do a search rather than end-user searching.

Once we had a broad list of possible problems and tools, we organized the solutions into functional sections:
- "Keeping Up with the Medical Literature";
- "Efficient Use of the Internet";
- "Keeping Up with Colleagues";
- "Keeping Up with Patient Education Information";
- "Storing and Managing all of this Information"; and
- "Getting Help."

Taming the paper beast

In designing the workshop, we quickly realized that extra paper would only contribute to our users' information overload. Thus, we eliminated handouts and planned the course around a Web site that could either stand alone or be used as a teaching tool. The Web site formed the outline for a classroom workshop.

The workshop and Web site provide several kinds of learning opportunities. Links to staff and internal and external documentation allow users to seek out more information and

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KEEPING CURRENT...KEEPING SANE!

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Keeping Up With Colleagues | | Keeping Up With Patient Education
Information | | Storing and Managing All of This! | | Getting Help |

Aside from tossing your computer out the window, what can be done to reduce the time-drain of browsing for current articles, surfing the Internet for possibly useful sites, and organizing personal and professional information? The purpose of this website is to pull together tricks and ideas that we have found to make information gathering and filtering efficient, cost-effective and manageable. These suggestions are representative, not exhaustive.

help when necessary. The organizational tips discussed provide help with gathering and filtering information in a wide range of formats. The Web site allows for self-motivated and self-paced learning; the classroom workshop provides interaction with a knowledgeable teacher. Both the Web site and workshop format provide links to human help and possibilities for further investigation.

There are numerous benefits to this approach. First is the consolidation of resources onto a single, cohesive Web page where the sites have been reviewed. Another is that the Web pages are not static; they are updated continuously. Additionally, using only the Web page for the workshop, with no paper handouts, forces the participants to learn about the benefits of Web technology. This can be an effective way to counteract the feeling of being overwhelmed by Web resources.

Much of the information on the Web site is presented as hyperlinks to other resources. Solutions we developed are representative, not comprehensive, and are sometimes specific to the Dartmouth environment. However, the concepts are applicable—and easily adaptable—to any information-providing environment.

Other libraries and departments within and beyond Dartmouth have expressed interest in adapting the Web site to their users' needs. Attendees at the workshops have been enthusiastic in their praise of the organization of and information available on the site. Some doctors use the Web site as their startup page in Netscape. Many others bookmark the page and consult it frequently. While the evidence of effectiveness and impact is anecdotal, it is clear that this approach has addressed a serious need in the biomedical community at Dartmouth for coping with information overload.

We invite you to try out our Web site at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~biomed/workshops/keks/, and send us your ideas for improvements.