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SOURCES OF INFORMATION
FOR NEW ZEALAND KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Business Studies at Massey University.

FRANCIS XAVIER SLIGO

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Sources of Information for New Zealand Knowledge Workers

ABSTRACT

Little is currently known about the ways in which knowledge workers in New Zealand organisations presently use and prefer to use both interpersonal and print sources of information. This study examined the sources employed by 318 knowledge workers in 17 organisations, comprising a mixture of private sector, public sector and quasi-governmental enterprises. Environmental and organisational, individual and source characteristics were explored in a review of the literature relevant to information sources, and a wide variety of disparate points of view were found among previous writers on the subject.

To accommodate the relatively undeveloped nature of the topic, an exploratory and descriptive study was designed in order to establish some basic findings. Research methods included cluster analysis and communication network analysis (in the pilot studies); assessment of source rankings, crosstabulations of status and sources, breakdown of education and print sources, correlation coefficients of status, education and sources, and discrepancy analysis of sources presently used and preferred.

Seven objectives were developed, which may be collapsed into five main topic areas: present and preferred use of information sources, and discrepancies arising; use by participants of interpersonal and print-based sources of information; use of sources which were internal and external to the organisation; the relationships between participants' status and source use; and the relationships between participants' education and source use.

Initially from the clustering process in the two pilot studies, and later from the ranking procedure across all organisations, it became evident that participants' status was a crucial factor in the present use of sources. Although distinct differences by status levels were found for present source use, preferred source use was almost entirely unrelated to status level. Overall, it appeared that as these knowledge workers moved up the hierarchy they tended to receive more information and record fewer discrepancies between information received and sought.

From the investigation of interpersonal and print sources, it was found that certain very accessible and internal interpersonal sources (coworkers, superior, subordinates and the grapevine) were most used, though two (also accessible and internal) print sources (memos and newsletters) were also frequently cited. Use of the grapevine seemed to be associated with lesser access to formal or officially sanctioned sources of information, but it was also found that participants tended to prefer to receive grapevine information only sometimes; if frequency of contact exceeded this, a negative discrepancy was likely to occur.

Few overt indications of information overload were found, but there was some evidence to suggest that the phenomenon of overload was more closely related to what staff felt able to handle rather than to what they would like to have had. There was also some evidence that external sources were contacted more by staff at the top and bottom of the organisation, than by the two middle levels. A complex pattern of correlations seemed to apply in respect of education and source use; relationships appeared to be emerging between education and external sources and the grapevine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer thanks his supervisors, Professor Ralph Love, of the Department of Management and Administration, Massey University, Dr Richard Spence of the Napier City Council, Dr Dick Brook of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics and Dr Tony Vitalis of the Department of Management and Administration, Massey University, for their constant support and advice over the various stages of this thesis.

Thanks are due to a variety of friends and colleagues who in many ways enlarged the writer's horizons, helped to accelerate his progress up numerous learning curves and gave much useful advice: they include Philip Dewe, Don Esslemont, Judy Cartwright and Judi Campbell.

Thanks are also due to the organisations represented in the study and the people within them who gave freely of their time, to the many other individuals who assisted with advice and support, and to the team of secretarial staff who coped so well with this work in its many manifestations: Pat Bedford, Lisa Boys, Anna Dunn, Sue Farquhar, Laura Hickson, Tracy Murray and (most particularly) Marie Smith.

Especial thanks are due to Mary Sligo for her unstinting gifts of time, encouragement and support; and to our children Ruth, Conor and Elinor for their tolerance of an absentee father.

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