Stanton Marris
energising the organisation
issue 05: decluttering

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"Less is more"
William Shakespeare, King Lear

"Lost time is never found again."
John Hill Aughey, 1828 - 1911

Clutter culture

Apparently, the average US office worker spends 30 minutes to two hours a day looking for things. We might call this 'non-value-adding activity'. We prefer to call it 'clutter', and it's the theme of this booklet.

You might recognise clutter from some of the things you hear around your office:

– 'I went out for lunch and when I got back I had twenty five new emails'

– 'That meeting was totally pointless; I don't see why I had to be there'

– 'Apparently it's filed on the system somewhere'

– 'I'm sorry but I'm back to back in meetings all day'

– 'The delay's due to the fact that it hasn't been signed off yet'

– 'I go to meetings all day and do my job in the intervals'

– 'I can't fill the vacancy until HR finish redrafting the new policy'

– 'What happened to that project we were doing last year?'

– 'Didn't you see my email?'

– 'We have to bring everyone up to speed'

– 'Let's pass it on to the sub-committee for further development'

– 'We've lost the plot'

Sound familiar? The uncomfortable truth is that in large organisations huge amounts of people's time is consumed doing things which add no value. This is expensive: it means lower productivity, things take longer to get done, it obscures the pathway to the future and it drains people's energy.

Why it matters

As we talk to organisations about raising performance, increasing productivity and enhancing energy, we recognise that this is often impossible to do until the clutter has been cleared away. Otherwise it's like asking a long-distance runner to suddenly do a sprint.

A tide of clutter means not being able to get to grips with the important work; it means wasting energy swimming against the tide; it means I'm always busy but rarely adding value.[1]

The result is tired people and tired organisations, and this carries a heavy cost: the truly pernicious thing about clutter is that it happens at an organisational level, despite the good intentions of individuals. Many organisations full of highly committed people nevertheless perform poorly.

One reason is the amount of clutter designed into the context or culture of an organisation, which the individual is powerless to change. Much of it is driven by politics and being seen to be doing things, and by the mismatch between the official messages about what to focus on (strategy, priorities, customers, etc) and the unofficial, more significant messages about how you get on around here – keeping on the right side of so-and-so, staying late at the office, offering up a longer report to the Board than the next guy, and so on.

But eventually clutter corrodes commitment, too, and those once-energetic individuals begin to sink under it. Rather than fight back, they lose interest, or even begin to collude with it, generating more clutter of their own and draining yet more energy from the organisation.

ClutterBuster:
Multinational FMCG firm went from a system of thick performance management manuals that arrived with a thud each year on the desks of local managers, and remained unread, to an intranet which simplified it all and put it in plain language.
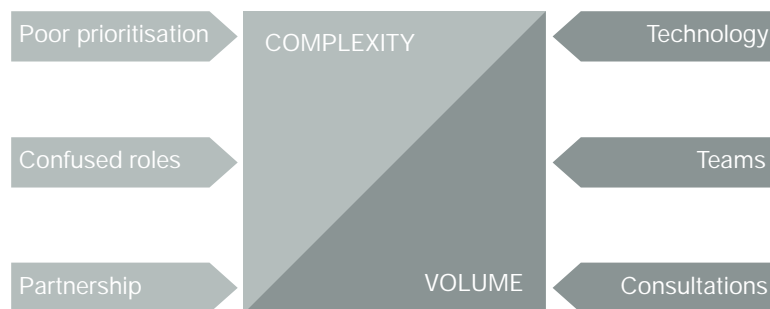
The underlying causes

How did we get ourselves into this mess? Why, after decades of management training, sharing best practice, and learning from the mistakes of the past, are we still so cluttered up?

Our experience demonstrates two major categories of root cause: volume and complexity. Volume is the sheer amount of 'stuff' in the modern organisation – the mountains of emails, the multiplicity of messages, the heaps of un-coordinated initiatives and projects. The greater the volume, the greater the complexity – and the more the waters are muddied, making it harder for simple, clear messages to reach throughout the organisation and drive corporate performance towards strategic objectives.

A good example of the link between volume and complexity is around data collection. Monthly field reports, sales figures and management accounts can multiply to the point where no-one has the capacity to analyse them, let alone act on their content. The volume is too great, creating complexity that obscures vital messages in a mass of read-outs.

The root causes of clutter

Poor prioritisation	COMPLEXITY	Technology
Confused roles		Teams
Partnership	VOLUME	Consultations

What can we do to reduce volume?

Technology
As technology proliferates, we need to do more and more to keep up with it. We need to master ways of making technology work for us, not be driven by it. Email discipline is just one area where many organisations are beginning to get on top of the tendency of technology to generate clutter.

Teams
Not everything needs a team. When teams are used inappropriately it can lead to extra work, unnecessary time taken out of diaries, and a dilution of accountability. Too often, the principle governing the creation of a team is democracy rather than the right mix of skills. The more people brought onto a team, the slower the decision-making process, the more duplication of papers, and so on. Before getting a team together, we need to ask ourselves two questions: Does this need a team? And who really needs to be involved?

Consultation
The good intentions behind feedback and consultation have created an industry in itself. The use of consultation needs to be disciplined and purposeful if it is not to become an excuse to postpone action, sometimes indefinitely.

"There is a bright future for complexity, with one thing always leading to another."

E.B. White, author and essayist, 1899 - 1985

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What can we do to reduce complexity?

Better prioritisation

Muffled or mixed messages from the top are a major cause of clutter. The more people understand what is critical to succcess (e.g. customer service, profit margin, market share), the more they will align what they do around it and eliminate worthless activity. The point of priorities is that they force choices.

Clarity about roles

Even in organisations that broadly know what they're about, there is still room for confusion over what individuals do within them. Where roles have not been clearly defined, effort goes into doing the wrong things: competing for territory, managing or protecting job boundaries. As people are asked to work more flexibly, to come onto teams and projects for short periods, there is a tendency away from the specialist towards the generalist, increasing the risk of confused roles. We need to be clear about what we're here for, and who is responsible for what.

Partnership

More and more organisations work closely with partners. Partnerships mean more interfaces, more complexity. Messages may be diluted and clarity about objectives lost. Partnerships need strong management and close monitoring to ensure that they take forward the organisational agenda.

The solution: the anti-project

So we need an organisational decluttering programme, right? Wrong!
That would be just another initiative, probably landed on HR to design and run, and requiring quantities of selling-in and associated uphill grind. It would increase the volume and, because such programmes are often detached from the real business of the organisation, contribute added complexity and muffling of core messages. Initiatives that were supposed to present a solution only add to the problem. They are clutter-creators, not clutter-busters.

The most important question a cluttered organisation can ask of itself is: 'What can we stop doing?'
We need a kind of anti-project: a project that instead of defining deliverables and activities, does just the opposite. It looks across an organisation's activities in terms of team workload, individual tasks, processes and initiatives, and goes on to identify what can be taken away without damaging the business. And then it closes those things down. And then it doesn't put new things in their place.

And if it weren't for Parkinson's law – that work expands to fill the time available – that would be the end of it. But even if you do a thorough organisational spring clean, the chances are that people will simply take an hour to do what they used to do in twenty minutes.

Which is where leaders come in. They must communicate the outcomes the organisation needs, along with the message that anything that does not contribute to those outcomes is not worth doing. Above all, they must practise what they preach. People take their cue from actions and behaviour, not from systems, rules and processes. Part of being an effective leader is to recognise that everything you do sends a signal.

Clutter must be attacked at a systemic, organisation-wide level, not by trying to fix the bits. The behaviour of leaders is crucial to this deep reach into the organisation to find what threatens to choke its growth and smother its potential.

A decluttering anti-programme

Step 1: Leader level
Leaders make and communicate real strategic choices. A few highly selective priorities flow from these. They personally stop doing and asking for stuff which doesn't contribute to those priorities. They reward people who do likewise.

Step 2: Organisational level
Then, and only then, proceed to some more classic interventions, such as process redesign. This works especially well when local teams are empowered to redesign their own processes. Performance management will also need to be systematically adjusted to bring it into line with real priorities.

Step 3: Individual level
There is a range of basic, everyday ways to help banish clutter, which individuals can do by themselves and will be encouraged to do so long as they see their leaders doing the same. These include better email discipline, writing shorter reports, and doing quick 'diary audits', to align what you should be spending your time on with how you actually spend it.

In summary

– clutter is an organisational blight that reduces the yield of strategic activity, and saps organisational energy

– it lurks in the everyday activities and behaviours of organisations, so it's easily overlooked

– many of the causes of clutter are connected to modern ways of doing business

– the way to tackle clutter is by subtracting, not by adding another project

– leaders can provide the necessary focus and discipline to reduce volume and complexity.

Design: www.theteam.co.uk

References:

1. "Beware of the Busy Manager", Sumantra Ghoshal and Heike Bruch, Harvard Business Review, February 2002

Energising the organisation
– a series of think pieces from Stanton Marris
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