

# **Drinking from the Fire Hose: Using Information for Decision-Making**

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# Key issues for discussion

- Drinking from the fire hose
- Information overload
- Discerning information from knowledge

The focus of this discussion is on session-time challenges but the recommendations can apply out of session as well.

# The problems

- Too much information, too little time
- Mismatches between
  - When the information comes and when you need it
  - How the information comes and how you need it
  - Other mismatches?
- Figuring out which sources to trust

# Why does the fire hose problem matter?

It affects:

- What you see and hear and what you don't
- The extent to which you can be a good and/or thorough consumer of information (consider when you care about *information* and when you care about *knowledge*)
- If and how you manage requests from constituents and requests from other sources

**Each of these can affect your productivity before, during, and after each legislative session.**

# Sources of the problems

In addition to too much information, too little time, sources of the overload and of the “when and how” mismatches include:

- Researchers
- Lobbyists
- Advocates
- Constituents
- Marketers
- Other sources?

# **When it comes to information overload, legislators are unique**

People in all sectors and nearly every office-based environment experience information overload but in your case, the information is not just information.

It often:

- Asks you to act
- Tells you to act
- Expects you to act
- Recognizes that you have power
- \*\*Doesn't understand the way the legislature works

# Teaching others how the legislature works

Our focus is on others overloading you with information but you can help manage that overload by helping them understand the basics, which include your

- Content needs
- Timeframes
- Staffing
- Preferred methods of communication

# Strategies for handling information overload

## What can you do?

Can you make some decisions *now* about

- What you need most for the **coming session** in terms of both issues and type of information?
- What you need least?



# To answer this, consider:

- What are the House/Senate's key issues?
- What are your key issues?
- What policy decisions have you made?
- What policy decisions are you unsure about?
- Then, identify the keywords, key sources, etc. that you would highlight when considering what information to take in.
- Then, use filters (Google, RSS, Outlook, and others) to do the initial sorting for you to help you rank order what to attend to and what to ignore.

# What can you do? (cont'd)

- What products are most useful to you and why?
- Distinguish between **offers of information** and **requests for action**.
  - Is it a report? An update? A request of you? A response to you?
- Making these and other distinctions can help you sort incoming information.

# Take charge of the information you receive

- Set ground rules and communicate them to the information sources
- Tell the information providers – *all sources* – what you want and how you want it

# Specific to e-mail

- Consider posting something such as the following as part of your email signature (and on your web page if you have one):
  - Thank you in advance for your input. You are welcome to share any information with me and my legislative assistant but I am most likely to be able to focus on your input if you summarize the information into the three main points that you'd like me to remember.
- Unsubscribe!

(Note about Gmail vs. ncleg.net)

# E-mail (cont'd)

- Manage expectations for responding – consider having an auto reply on your email, such as
  - Thank you for taking the time to communicate with me. I receive [many? Hundreds of?] emails daily, in addition to phone calls and mailings. While every email may not receive a detailed reply, I appreciate your input...

- Consider whether there might be general guidance that the GA could post on its home page that would apply to all members.
- If members were interested, this could potentially include:
  - Tips to “the public” for sharing information with members and staff
  - General information about the workings of the GA and whom to contact for different purposes

The detailed information currently on the site is extremely helpful – could the above serve as a means to reiterate and condense it?

# Who can help?

- The GA Information Systems Division can apply “rules” to your Outlook email to help sort and categorize the high volume of information you receive by email.
- Your LA – do you give your LA guidance *before and during session* about what sources and keywords to flag in the emails and documents you receive?
- Additional support - Can you find \$500 for a student intern each semester to assist your LA with information sifting and sorting?

# Sorting the paper (as distinct from e-mails)

Is it

- Now, later, or recycle?
- Keyword, of interest, or recycle?
- From a trusted source, a questionable source, or not sure?
- Does it provide information, knowledge or both?



# Figuring out what sources to trust

It may not be easy to determine who and what your “key sources” are. How can you become more familiar with the **sources** (individuals and organizations) and **perspectives** that concern the key issues that you have identified?

- Have they taken the time to learn about you?
- Can they tell you what your “allies” think *and* what those whom you disagree with think?
- Are they sharing their motivations?
- What else?

# Important considerations

Even after you've decided whether a source is one you can trust, what about the information they provide?

- Not all information is good but how can you tell?
- Distinguish between **information** and **knowledge** (e.g., will it “simply” inform or might it affect your decision making?)
- Distinguish between information/data and policy recommendations (e.g., is it “simply” informing or is it asking you to act?)
- If it's data, can you trust it? (e.g., are the data sources noted?)

- Access to rigorous, reliable research is much greater than it used to be *and* evidence of “what works” exists for a much broader set of issues than used to be the case.
- This makes it more feasible for you to review information based on scientifically valid study designs to decide what deserves your attention. If this isn’t possible or practical, data experts within the GA, university partners, and others can help.

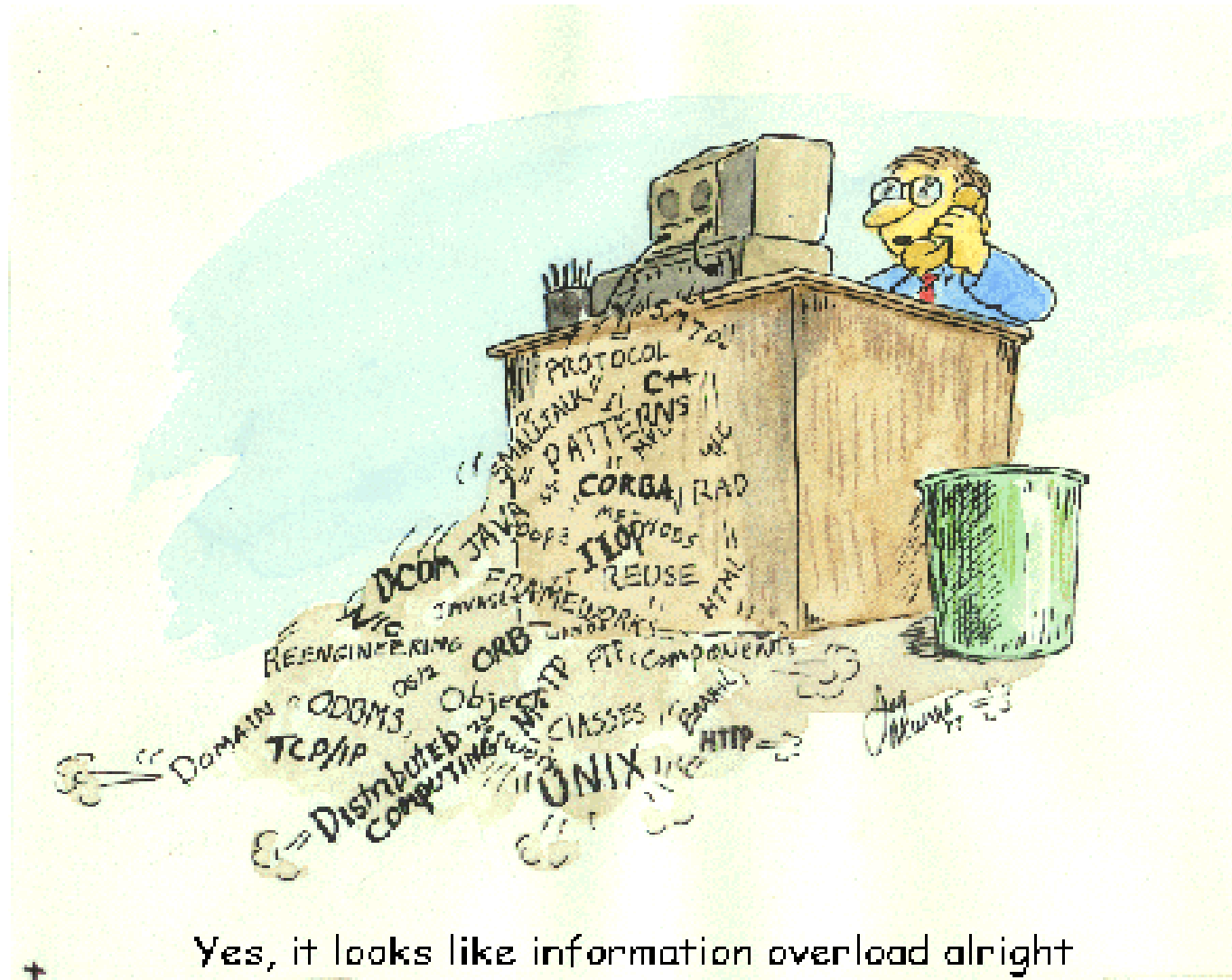
# In summary

- You don't want all information, you want enough good information. Don't let "all" be the enemy of the good.
- The information you receive often won't come at the time or in the format that is best for you. You can improve that by guiding your sources and managing the in-flow.

# The hope is to move from this...

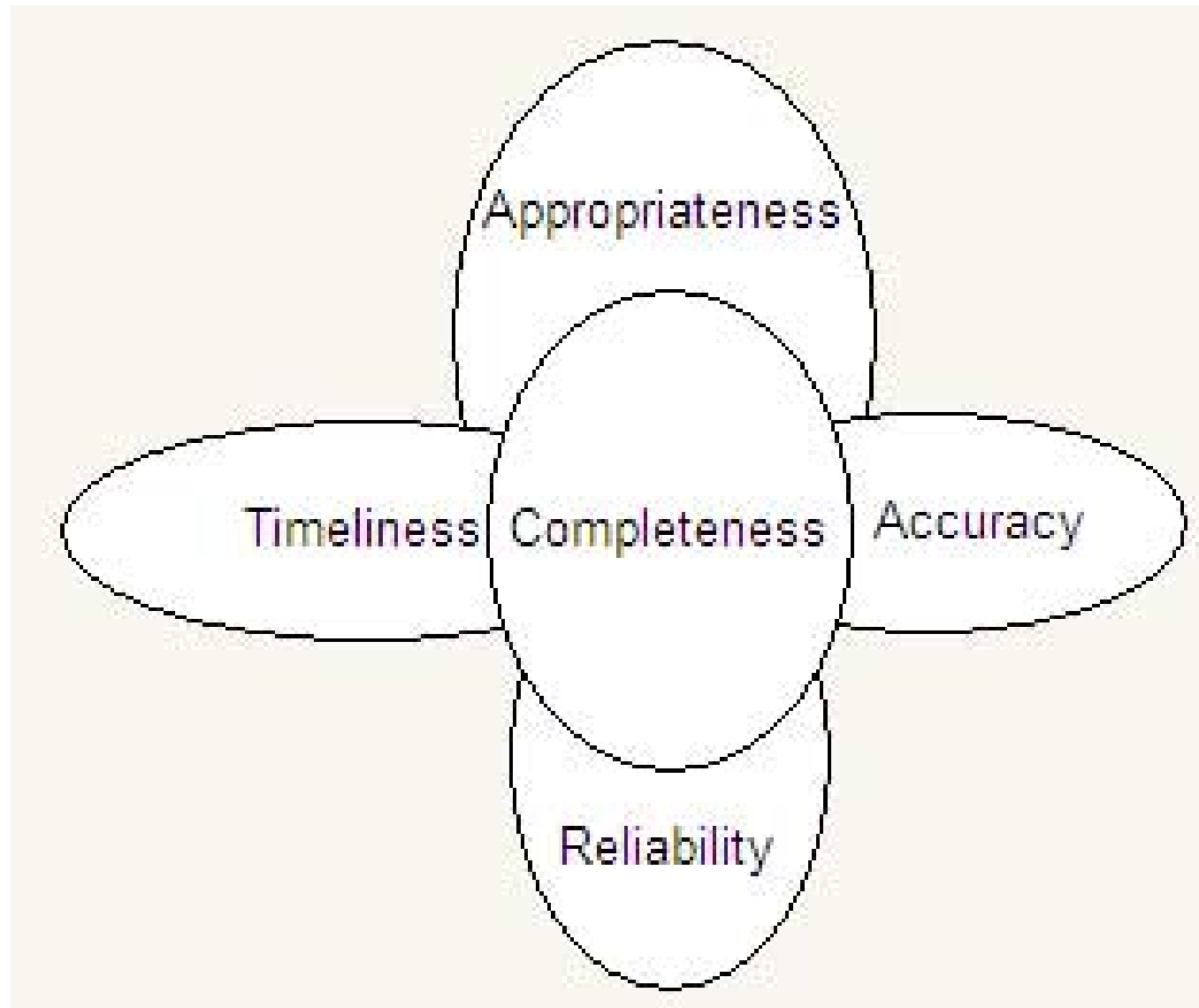


# And this...



Yes, it looks like information overload alright

# To this.



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