

Learning to manage your
organization's scarcest asset

Attention!

By John C. Beck and Thomas H. Davenport

Sitting on your desk right now is a proposal from one of your department heads. It describes a project you would love to undertake. It would enhance your company's competitiveness. You have the money in your budget to approve it.

You're turning it down.

Why? Because apart from the money, it will cost your organization something else—something far more dear than dollars. It's clear that, in order to succeed, the project will demand *attention*.

And that's something, unfortunately, you're flat out of. ►►



Meeting
3:30
Friday 11

MAIL YOU HERE

RUSH!
RUSH!

IMPORTANT

Two major forces are converging in the last days of the 20th century to create a management challenge you've never had to think about before.

The forces themselves are well recognized and widely heralded. One is the shift in all developed economies away from manual, industrial labor toward so-called knowledge work. The other is the growing problem of "information overload" ▼—a product of media proliferation, communications

technology, democratization of workplaces and other factors.

It's the convergence of these trends, however, that's creating a new problem for organizations and their leaders: They must now, more than ever before, become experts at *managing attention*. ▼

They will need to understand, for instance, the difference between capturing aural versus visual attention. Visual attention is captured

The high cost of information overload

Got enough attention to go around these days? *Right!* That's a laugh. Look at your in-box. And your incoming e-mail queue. Don't forget all those voicemail messages. Face it: You can't deal with all the information the world throws at you. You've got an attention deficit.

Join the club. According to a study by the Institute for the Future, the average American white-collar worker sends and receives 190 messages every day across various media—and 71 percent of these workers feel "overwhelmed" by the volume of information they receive. (What are the other 29 percent thinking?)

Should management care about employee "info-stress"? Does the shortage of attention matter to business performance? You bet, because it can result in...

- An increased likelihood of missing a key piece of information in making an important decision.
- A decrease in the amount of work time—and home time—to do anything but deal with information.
- A general raising of the standard for what it takes to get someone's attention.
- A decreased ability to focus our attention when needed.

If you let your organization's attention go unmanaged, its scarcity will soon become your enemy. Your company will do something really stupid—because it didn't have enough attention to do otherwise.

How to manage attention

Imagine you have a new product idea and want to see it become a top-seller. For that dream to be realized, your concept needs to attract positive attention at many points along the way. First, you need to sell the idea to your colleagues. Next, you need the best possible people to join the development team to sign up as alliance partners. Downstream, you need the attention of your marketing people and sales force—who on any given call might be more inclined to pitch a different product from the company's repertoire than yours. You need your distributors' attention, your retailers' attention, the media's attention...and, finally, the customers' attention.

All this constitutes a *chain of attention* that must be managed every bit as closely as you now attend to your value chain. Each well-managed link in the attention chain buys you access to other links. Weak links cut you off from your goal.

It's more than funding, and it's more than marketing. Just like good ranchers riding the range to check and mend fences, good managers must continually check the strength of the attention chains on which their success depends.

by the abnormal things that don't match the surroundings. Aural attention, on the other hand, goes most readily to the familiar. A friend's voice is recognizable amid the chatter.

In a fast-changing business environment, the key to a company's continued success is its ability to **mobilize quickly**. ▼ Seizing new opportunities and responding to new challenges requires an organization's concerted focus. But directing the attention of a large, diverse and increasingly empowered

workforce is not easy; just as in the marketplace, it depends on **cutting through** ▼ all other claims on people's attention.

Increasingly, managers are using the tools of the "attention industries"—advertising, entertainment and design—to better manage attention in the workplace. We may wait a long time for the organizational equivalent of the Oscars, but managers will need to become producers and directors for the information that really matters. ►►

Mobilize your people

If management were as simple as deciding what to do and then ordering others to "make it so," there would be little need to worry about attention. In fact, that basic prioritize-and-delegate approach has served companies for years.

The problem today is that you have empowered, entrepreneurial workers who make their own decisions on priorities daily. They do this under constant attention assault—ranging from, for example, that office manager who has discovered global voicemail distribution to the full force of the Internet's temptations.

At the same time, they've turned into knowledge workers. Your old manual laborers used to be productive while their minds wandered elsewhere. According to Woody Allen, 80 percent of success was showing up. Not anymore.

In short, you can't take your workforce's attention for granted anymore. It's not in your control to start with, it's spread more thinly than ever—and you need more of it to succeed. When you need something done, you absolutely cannot simply say "make it so." You have to make the project so compelling that your workforce can't resist.

Show time!

Getting attention today requires real creativity on four fronts.

Thinking creatively about *medium* means thinking beyond text. As visually attractive as a document can be, it engages only the reader's eyes, leaving all other senses open to distractions. Audio, video and—even more compelling—hands-on demonstrations will drive your message home more effectively.

Unfortunately, few organizations make an effort to determine what *content* their people really need; even workers themselves can have a hard time articulating their information needs. Identifying those needs depends on analysts who are familiar with the limitations of information delivery and with the oddities of human behavior regarding information.

Good information *design* doesn't simply deal with graphics. It also involves thinking about how information should be structured for maximum uptake. One designer, for instance, might decide to present a key message in the form of a story (a good idea, too, given that narratives always score high on attention and retention), while another might deliver it in a series of charts.

Perhaps the single most important factor in getting information receivers' attention is their level of *participation*. If I'm really interested in engaging you, I will not allow you to remain passive. I'll have you imagine yourself in a case study, present the information yourself or take part in an "information experience," like a war game.

Management's first and clearest challenge is to capture attention and direct it toward initiatives, tasks and behaviors that are critical to company success.

Learning to capture attention starts with understanding **human psychology** ▼ — what gets people to take notice and, more important, take action.

But responsible managers also recognize that capturing attention is only part of

their job. No matter how fascinating the work at hand, people have **only so much attention** ▼ to give.

Attention is totally lost if the senses are overwhelmed. Pilots who tested heads-up displays in fighter jets with maximum visual information not only lost the ability to pay attention to anything on the screen, they also lost the ability to hear radio commands. Relentless attention-getting tactics will only leave an organization

Honey? Vinegar? Carrot? Stick?

A person's attention can be engaged in at least six ways. It can be engaged *positively* ("I can't wait to see what happens next!") or *negatively* ("I'll be in trouble if I miss this"). It can be *front of mind* or *back of mind*. It can be *captive* (think of those "upcoming attractions" shown just before the feature film) or *voluntary*. Interestingly, none of these pairings is mutually exclusive. A single task—say, writing a proposal to win a great piece of business—can get an individual's attention in all six ways.

The point is an important one for managers hoping to focus more attention on particular challenges. Getting maximum attention will mean tapping both ends of each continuum. Both positive and negative terms, for instance, can be used to communicate the consequences of attention: Focus will lead to fame, fortune and fun; neglect will result in, if not a life of despair, then in a delayed promotion. Managers can also capture voluntary attention by making work intellectually and socially stimulating—even in situations (like meetings) where attention is largely captive. Finally, back-of-mind attention can be won with ambient reminders like project-specific mouse pads and screen savers, which guide ongoing thought to issues almost subliminally.

Maxing out

Can our attention be expanded or otherwise improved?

Psychologists suggest that at any given moment, there is an absolute limit to the amount of information we can assimilate. Most of us probably feel we've passed that point in our own jobs.

It's alluring to think there might be a way to expand our total attention capacity so that we could be more productive and informed at work and at home. Looking at the entertainment media of a generation ago seems to support the notion that this capacity can increase with conditioning. Older movies as well as older television and radio programs were slower-moving and had fewer cuts—they simply transmitted fewer bits. By the same token, 1990s children trained on video games no doubt have a higher information-absorption level on average than their elders.

Does this mean the attention of an organization can be cultivated and increased—perhaps in even less than a generation? It's impossible to say today. But as managers begin to realize the importance of attention, we'll see more conscious attempts to improve it. Get ready to sign up for attention management.

exhausted—and ultimately jaded—if it seems to people that their attention is being abused. (Remember the boy who cried “wolf”?)

Beyond capturing attention, it's critical for management to learn to *allocate* attention judiciously by **structuring its flow** ▼ and conserving as much of it as possible.

Attention must be carefully invested to yield maximum business results. This implies, in turn, that ways must be found to monitor

attention—where it's going and with what effects—and to **measure it**. ▼

In the words of Peter Drucker, you cannot manage what you cannot measure.

If all this is beginning to sound like ►►



Is technology the solution—or the problem?

Information technologies have long been used to help in engaging attention. It has also been suggested that they're the No. 1 cause of today's attention scarcity. But getting attention is only one function that information technology can perform; increasingly, we're also seeing it applied to help *structure*, *monitor* and *preserve* attention.

Technology designed to structure the flow of attention can be seen already in scenario-based training programs, games, simulations and on the Web, where site designers try to move the user through a pre-defined “clickstream.” Monitoring technologies attempt to determine whether attention is being paid to information. The earliest devices used for this purpose were the “people meters” that tracked whether someone was watching television. More sophisticated technologies already exist for monitoring evidence of information-induced brain waves and for determining whether eyes are focused on the point in question.

The most popular technologies may turn out to be those that preserve, protect and defend people's scarce attention. These technologies—already previewed in e-mail filters and push technologies, even in caller identification on phones—promise users they'll get only information they value. To the extent these things exist already, we're beginning to see how—and how much—attention can be preserved.

Measuring attention

How can we possibly measure something as ephemeral and subjective as attention?

One answer is that although attention is hard to pin down, the activities and results associated with attention management are not. It's possible, for example, to determine how many demands are being placed on a worker's attention, and how changes in that number over time affect work quality. Similarly, it's possible to survey managers on whether they are paying more attention to, say, litigation matters than to recruiting and mentoring.

Absolute values are unrealistic to hope for—but are not the point, anyway. What we really care about as managers is the degree and direction of change over time. If attention is a driver of final results, then we should also view it as a leading indicator.

One tool that shows promise for measurement at both the individual and the organizational level currently is being tested in a number of companies. The “AttentionScape” uses self-reported data to gauge differences over time and among individuals in how attention is being allocated to important business issues. Early results are intriguing—and make the case for better management.

management of an **economic resource**, ▼ there's a good reason. Attention is, in fact, a resource in many respects—probably the scarcest and most valuable resource organizations have to manage.

It's no surprise, then, to discover that great business leaders can be best understood as great attention managers. Think of people like Akio Morita, Thomas Watson Jr., Percy Barnevik, Jack Welch, Robert Goizueta. Now consider their ability to:

- Capture the sustained attention of many diverse workers and allocate it to the areas most important to the company's success.
- Focus their personal attention on the information and other input most critical to making excellent strategic decisions.
- Guide the attention of analysts, investors—and, of course, customers—toward the company's competitive strengths.

Attention has been the key to their business success. Why would you leave it unmanaged? ■

An investment mind-set

The first law of economics states that value derives from scarcity. By that logic, attention is probably the world's most valuable commodity. But is it really possible to view attention as a resource and to suggest that there is an "economics of attention"?

Let's start with the basics: If attention is an economic good, it should be possible to exchange it for other economic goods, like money. It is—people clearly pay to gain the attention of potential customers, political leaders, etc., even though they will not get anything but attention for their money.

Fungibility is an issue, of course (your attention may not be worth the same as Bill Gates'), so it's unlikely attention will replace money as a currency. But, with several electronic

commerce companies now paying individuals directly for their attention, even the most unassuming consumers are discovering how liquid an asset attention is. (Similarly, some phone service providers now give free calls to consumers who are willing to listen to brief advertising messages before being connected.)

What does attention economics imply for the individual? Mainly, the need for an investment mind-set. Each of us should be accumulating and allocating our attention in ways that yield other scarce goods. Considered in this light, the most striking thing about internal meetings is not how much of our attention they command, but how much attention we squander on them. In the future, we may not grant anything so much attention for such an unclear reward.

Did we practice what we preach?

This piece looks different from the typical management article for a number of reasons—first, because we knew the difference in itself would make this piece stand out. Novel structure, graphics and type help us pique your interest in a novel set of ideas. We're also trying to capture your attention by scattering multiple "hooks" throughout the pages; the short length of each self-contained block is designed to encourage you to dive in and sample the content.

At the same time, we don't simply want to grab all your attention; we want to help you conserve it, too.

Although it's possible to read only the 600 central words (a little more than 20 percent of this article) and take away the major messages of the piece, the outtakes linked to the main argument allow you to allocate your attention judiciously to the topics of most interest.

Did it work? Let us know! The first 100 people to send an e-mail commenting on this piece to john.c.beck@accenture.com will receive a token of our appreciation. (Nothing formal, just pure fun—but sure to help you get attention in a business meeting!)



John Beck is an associate partner and senior research fellow at the Accenture Institute for Strategic Change. He is also a visiting professor at the Anderson School of Management at the University of California at Los Angeles. Dr. Beck has written extensively on strategic management, globalization, leadership and organizational behavior. He is based in Phoenix.



Thomas Davenport, director of the Accenture Institute for Strategic Change, is a professor in the Management Information Systems Department at the Boston University Graduate School of Management. He is a widely published author and a speaker on the topics of information and knowledge management, re-engineering and enterprise systems.