

FAMILY PLANNING FOR PAPERWORK CONTROL*

by Masood Hasan

If we were to look into a number of our large and massive buildings we will find apart from the usual office tables and chairs (and of course the ubiquitous chai-khana) that pride of place is taken by a very very large and prolific family (known to reproduce itself at a moment's notice) of paper, all sorts – forms, files, returns, statements, estimates, guesstimates and the like. Whenever someone wishes to lay his hands on one of these slippery customers he finds it more difficult than he thinks, this must create a sense of frustration and one of the accepted ways of getting around it is to cook up something. Are we not being defeated by an ogre of our own creation and even though we have the power of consigning the same to the fire place, do we ever dare to?

One piece of paper gives birth to several others. The case of multiplication where no "midwives" are required can reproduce hundreds of 'identicals'. Should we not cry halt and make a serious attempt to back our way out of this paperwork jungle? If we do not it is only a reflection of our way of thinking.

Talk of Mr. Senior, with the weight of years of experience carried in a permanent frown or harried look, white hair or the absence of the same and one comes away with the confirmed feeling that unless there is confusion and disorder around him he will not find life worth living. To attempt to initiate the uninitiated into the secrets of getting rid of such jungles is as good as attempting to reason with a shikari who will insist (with his very good reasons) on maintaining all the existing flora. Such impenetrable jungles have existed everywhere there is civilization. It only requires a brave and courageous Mr. Senior to become a good forester and through good forest management prune and thin existing growth and bring in new varieties to help balance the over-all health of the terrain so as to optimize the resources at hand.

Mr. Senior should be made to realise that playing it by the ear (even though it does not lend an aura of mystery to the proceedings) does little or nothing to create the organizational infrastructure conducive towards increasing productive efforts. And it is funny that highly productive organisations appear to improve so much more easily than others. This is because in such an atmosphere the spirit of innovation is not dampened through a negative approach to matters. To be able to say 'yes' to life is the basis of our faith, there are others that start with a definite 'no'. We must take stock of this sorry situation so as to launch an effective family planning campaign against our fertile paper population. Why is so much reliance placed on the seat of our pants, the answer is: if not, what else? After all is not the data (using this word in its singular number!) base suspect? And so we complete the circle of ignorance.

REPORTS

Any attempt to systematize our way of doing things will more often than not, reveal that the family characteristics of Paperwork are fairly constant – and why not since their

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chromosomes all lack the same ingredient – they have a pattern of (reproducing Mr. Routine Report, Mr. Requested Report and Mr. Special (alias Panic) Report. Any administrative system worth its salt (or sugar?) must take strenuous attempts to ensure the proliferation of Routine at the expense of Requested, and Requested at the expense of Special Reports. This pressure from Special to Requested to Routine must always be there.

Routine is usually triggered off by time or an event. Requested usually requires sifting the existing paper network for data floating around but avoiding easy capture. Proper planning ie foreseeing ones requirements of this commodity (information) ensures an objective analysis which in turn provides the base for developing a better and more efficient way of doing things. With more and more Requested's becoming Routine we will find that Special will lose his nickname of Panic and truly be representative of its class. To visualize such a state of affairs may leave Mr. Senior somewhat breathless but it should nonetheless be an exhilarating experience. Have we not felt the fresh but odd sensation of the cooler breezes whizzing past our ears after a long belated hair cut at this time of the year? Make you feel streamlined, does it not? Such streamlining of our paperwork affairs will bring the blessings of more people that we think.

Many a time a question is asked of Mr. Senior. If it is so much out of the blue that no information is available in his set-up then something is radically wrong – maybe the wrong Mr. Senior has been addressed! If the correct one is popped the question and there is difficulty in collaring what is required, a goodly infusion of homework is indicated to put his data base in order. For then and only then will he have the 'luxury' of thinking out 'in his own time' constructive answers. We may say he will act rather than react. This will also lead to creating an atmosphere favouring innovation and this we sorely lack. And wonder of wonders the lost aura of mystery is replaced by a bright halo of knowledge and this is truly meaningful.

This attitude of mind will promote the continuing expansion of a reliable data base in the direction of Special to Requested to Routine whether the paperwork is required for current information (day-to-day control) or for historical records (financial and statistical information) or for purposes of forecasting. It also makes for better replies on Action Reports, for better appreciation of Status Reports and for better utilization of Reference Reports.

If we consider the work of a surgeon I understand some 85 per cent of his time is spent in controlling bleeding and 15 per cent or so could be spent on the operation itself. The same sort of situation exists where we are dealing with what is meaningful and redundant, when putting things down in black and white. Let us pause and consider, have we not agreed that family planning is a good thing!

Let us all learn from our mistakes as that is the experience from which we can expect good judgement in the years to come. But supposing we were to learn from the mistakes of others, is anything wrong with it? In fact, we would be able to take a few short cuts on the road to making better use of what we have. This means, amongst other things that

there must be a general awareness of what progress has been made in control of paper proliferation wherever suitable related family planning techniques have been applied with benefit elsewhere.

Let us understand that entire basis of all organized activity is the dissemination of information, let us also understand that organized activity can run itself to a dynamic standstill by disseminating too much, too little or inaccurate information of what is going on. Let us also understand you cannot get something for nothing hence the requisite effort must be put in if we are to achieve anything significant output. If we can understand all this why can we not take the first step towards the realisation that whatever work we do may also be treated to some one else's. So let us try to understand how we can achieve the goal of more efficient operations not by making someone else less efficient but by rethinking the strategies. How the tactics fall in line to a large extent is what this article is about anyway.

/Family Planning