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Topic 1
Collect and assess information

Every day, organisations are exposed to an abundance of information they must manage, such as letters, emails, minutes of meetings, reports, journals, promotional material, newsletters, raw data, contracts, financial documents, customer and staff details, and operational plans. All of this is essential for the day-to-day operations and the continued growth and prosperity of the organisation. If this mass of information is to be used to benefit the organisation, collecting, analysing, storing and retrieving information must be managed efficiently through systems and processes.

In this topic you will learn how to:

1A Access product and service information

1B Use reliable methods to collect information efficiently

1C Assess information for clarity, accuracy, currency and relevance

1D Use interpersonal skills to access information from colleagues

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Access information: comply with conduct and ethics

A code of conduct or code of ethics is a set of standards outlining the behaviour that an organisation expects of all its staff. Many organisations provide their code of ethics on their website so that clients and potential staff understand the standards and values that are upheld by the organisation. An example of ethical conduct is to use information collected only for the purpose for which it is intended.

Below are some of the Australian Public Service (APS) Code of Conduct requirements.

Australian Public Service Code of Conduct requirements
Use Commonwealth resources in a proper manner and for a proper purpose.
Do not provide false or misleading information in response to a request for information made for official purposes in connection with the employee's APS employment.
Do not improperly use inside information or the employee's duties, status, power or authority to gain a benefit or advantage for the employee or any other person.

Access information: comply with protocols

Protocols are a set of rules or guidelines adopted by an organisation. They are more specific than a code of conduct or ethics, as they tell you what appropriate action to take in a certain situation or set of circumstances.

1B Use reliable methods to collect information efficiently

It is essential that you can trust the information you collect to use at work. If the information is not reliable, then you risk consequences as small as a staff member's name being spelt incorrectly on an award or as large as budget projections being out by thousands of dollars. Your methods of gathering reliable data must be an efficient use of your and others' time, or the department's or organisation's productivity may be affected.

Below are some tips for beginning your search for information, to ensure the information is reliable and makes efficient use of time and resources.

When

Find out when the information is needed. This helps you plan your search. It is not useful to spend three weeks collecting information your manager wants in two days. You may need to ask other people for help when your time line is very short.

What

Make sure you know exactly what information is needed. Information that is not relevant and reliable can cause unnecessary expenses and affect productivity.

How much

Make sure you know how much information is needed. You can waste valuable time gathering large amounts of information when only an overview is required.

Collate

Think about how you will combine the information you gather to ensure it is grouped and categorised in a way that is useful to you. You may use a database, spreadsheet, Microsoft Word document or written list. It may be useful to draft some main headings to help you collate the information.

Collect information: from an intranet

Some organisations manage their own intranet. This is an electronic system similar to the internet, except that it is a private network that holds information only available to the organisation's staff. The main purpose of an intranet is to share organisational information among staff. Set aside time each week to browse your organisation's intranet to stay up to date and learn to navigate the site quickly.

Most intranets contain the following types of information:

- General information, such as contact details of branches and departments, the company profile and history, reports and policies
- Details of products and services, such as product specifications, price lists, brochures, sales scripts and services offered
- Databases containing customer contact details, purchasing history, correspondence and preferences
- Sales data, such as sales figures and targets, stock lists, sales analyses and reports
- Human resources information, such as leave forms, policies and procedures manuals, staff contact details and training resources
- Regulations and legislation relating to the organisation

Collect information: from files

Records kept in current or archival files often need to be accessed to retrieve information for a request or project. For example, you might be asked to:

- obtain a list of former contractors
- find a contract
- see how much a previous project cost.

Become familiar with the filing system in your organisation so you do not waste valuable time searching.

How business information is used: examples

All information collected and distributed is used by the organisation to support its business practices.

Below are some examples where information was needed for analysis, decision-making and developing plans, strategies and options.

Analysis

Parkinson's Office Supplies was considering buying new software to manage customer orders. Before management purchased anything, however, they needed precise information about how orders were currently taken and how the process could be improved. The resulting analysis was used to decide on the software best suited to the situation. Management realised that the software used by large retail stores – the software they had originally considered buying – was not suited to their small business, which sold fewer items to fewer customers.

Decision-making

Stills and Nash, a clothing manufacturer, planned to produce 8000 pairs of socks during May. Having a set target enabled the organisation to determine the amount of wool and cotton thread it needed to have in stock, the staff numbers required and the payroll estimates. Also, sales staff used the production target to estimate the amount of stock that would be available to customers over a given period.

Plans and strategies

Jenny works as a receptionist at a chain-store toy supplier. Over a period of a month, she received a number of calls from customers asking for a specific electronic game they did not stock. Jenny monitored customer demand using a form she developed to record all customer inquiries. She took her research to management, who asked her to continue with her research for a set period of time. They would then decide whether to include this game in their product range.

1D Use interpersonal skills to access information from colleagues

Using appropriate interpersonal skills is essential when you are collecting data or information from people. Establish a good rapport with the people you wish to receive information from. A pleasant, courteous manner puts people at ease, encourages cooperation and helps to build relationships and networks. Comply with legislation by using inclusive language.

When gathering information from other people in the workplace, always use language the other person can understand; check that you understand what the other person has said; listen carefully to understand the other person's viewpoint; and use appropriate body language to assist the communication process.

Below are some tips for accessing information from other people.

Approaching people

When approaching people for information on the telephone or in person, always ask whether it is a convenient time for them, or if they prefer you to make an appointment or contact them at another time. Ensure you use the correct protocol in contacting them. For example, it may be inappropriate for you to directly contact a senior person in the organisation, but you should contact their assistant as the first step.

Being prepared

Know what you want to ask and phrase your questions clearly and succinctly. Avoid having someone say later, 'Oh, I didn't know that was what you were talking about' or 'Why didn't you tell me that's what you wanted to know?'

Researching

Don't forget to do some research beforehand to ensure that you don't waste someone's time by asking for information that is readily available elsewhere, such as on the internet. Information can be collected over the telephone, by email, by formal letter, via a survey or face to face.

Use questioning skills to access information

Gathering information from people involves asking questions. The ability to ask the right question at the right moment in a conversation can save time and energy, and avoid misunderstandings and frustration. Do not assume the other person knows what you mean. There is a particular skill to asking questions. You must first decide what information you are looking for and then ask questions that help you get the information you want. There are different ways to ask questions, as outlined below.

Open questions	Open questions are a good way to start a conversation because they elicit information and ensure a discussion takes place. You cannot answer 'yes' or 'no' to an open question. Open questions usually begin with 'when', 'why', 'how', 'where', 'what', 'who', 'tell' or 'give'. For example: Why did you …? What happened when …? How did you …?
Closed questions	Closed questions can only be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' or a specific detail such as a number or name. They can be useful in saving time because they discourage further conversation. Closed questions usually begin with 'did', 'will', 'is', 'can', 'do', 'would' or 'how many'. For example: Can you do this? Will they meet with me? Is this correct?
Probing questions	Probing questions allow you to explore a train of thought further. They are similar to open questions, except that you lead the conversation in a direction that helps you gather facts. For example: Do you think the reason …? Was it because …? In what way do you think …?
Clarifying questions	Clarifying questions draw together the main points of the conversation. In your own words, restate what the speaker has said, to check that you have understood. This ensures the accuracy of the information and confirms agreement between you and the other person about what is being discussed. For example: From what you have said, you would like your health insurance policy to reflect your change in health. Have I understood correctly? Are you saying that …? Do you believe the problem is …?

2A Organise information in a format suitable for analysis and dissemination

Information must serve a purpose. Raw data is not useful in itself unless you can make sense of it. At some point, it needs to be organised and presented in a format that is meaningful to others. When you are making decisions about how to organise information, you need to ask a few questions.

- Who will use this information? Is the information for internal staff or external clients, a senior or junior person, someone with lots of knowledge on the topic or only a little?
- Are there any business requirements around its organisation and presentation, such as branding requirements? Should it be organised electronically or in hard copy?
- How will the information be used?

Types of information

Information use usually falls into one of three types: analysis, interpretation and dissemination, as shown below. Follow the organisation's requirements for organising the information into an appropriate format to assist readers.

Analysis

Analysis means to break a complex problem or data down into smaller, more manageable parts and examine it. This is often done because these smaller pieces of information will lead to a solution of a more complex problem. For example, analysis of interest rate patterns may explain customer loan approval rates and result in new loan products being advertised.

Interpretation

Interpretation means providing the meaning or explanation of a piece of information. For example, an interpretation of sales data can explain the buying patterns of clients.

Dissemination

Dissemination means to spread or broadcast information. For example, company financial information may be disseminated via its annual report to a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.

Format information using symbols

Symbols are used in documents to draw attention to some aspect of the information, such as a note or a tip, the type of information – for example, R (for 'research'), or to confirm or reinforce something.

Word processing and desktop publishing software applications provide a range of symbols that can be inserted into documents. Some symbols are standard, such as safety symbols. These are used to alert people to hazards, tell people about the need to use safety equipment and show the location of safety equipment, such as first-aid and emergency facilities.

Here are two examples of safety symbols.

Poisonous substance

Flammable liquid

Format information using software

Be familiar with and competent in using a range of software applications so you can select the most appropriate one for the job. Below is a summary of common types of computer applications and descriptions of what they are used for.

Word processing software

Word processing software produces documents, such as letters, memos and faxes, as well as complex reports, financial tables and procedural manuals. It is used when the content of a document is mostly text with headings to help the reader see what information is included. It is not suitable for a document with a lot of graphics and a complex layout. This type of software is extremely versatile, but sometimes other software applications do the job more efficiently.

Maintain telephone information

Most organisations have an internal phone directory, a phone operation manual and protocols for dealing with messages left on answering machines and voicemail. These may be electronic or hard copy. Ensuring this information is accessible and up to date is essential for easy communication throughout the business.

- Store frequently used numbers in your phone. They can be updated easily if people change numbers.
- Deal with phone messages as soon as you can, responding to, deleting or forwarding them, so old messages are not left sitting on your system.

Maintain information using a photocopier, printer, fax machine and shredder

Only photocopy or print information you need to have on paper in order to be able to do your work, keeping sustainable work practices in mind. Always empty photocopier and print out-trays promptly. There may be an organisation policy that any documents left in out-trays at the end of the week will be destroyed. This eliminates the problem of having out-of-date copies lying around.

If your organisation transmits and receives business correspondence by fax, you may be responsible for maintaining the fax out-tray and making sure faxes are collected or distributed regularly. Replenish fax paper often to avoid hold-ups when the machine runs out of paper. You may be able to fax information directly from your computer if it has the appropriate software. Today, most people send email attachments rather than faxes.

Some paper information may need to be removed, by either shredding it or consigning it to a security bin provided by a document security company. Electronic versions may need to be deleted according to organisational procedures.

Communicate information to supervisors and colleagues

If you are presenting information to supervisors or colleagues, ask them how they would like the material presented.

The way information is to be used usually determines the way it is presented. For example, it may be communicated in an online procedures manual, verbally during a staff meeting or on an information poster displayed in the office. A long report produced in hard copy will probably be presented in a traditional format with numbered sections, wide margins and binding on the left-hand side. Information being produced for a presentation may be stored as PowerPoint files or handouts.

Questions to ask supervisors and colleagues:

- Should there be a cover page?
- Will the company logo be included?
- Should disclaimers or copyright notices be included?
- Will a header and/or footer be required?
- Will the information be bound?
- How many copies of the information are required?

Communicate information to line managers

Line managers plan and manage resources and provide organisations with information such as production costs, production schedules, staff requirements and many other details involved in the day-to-day running of an organisation.

You may be asked to help a line manager collect and collate information on various aspects of business operations. For example, a line manager will have specific knowledge of the way items are produced in a manufacturing business. The organisation may decide to document this information and pass it on to the training department, where it will be included in training manuals.

Communicate information to clients

Information for clients can be delivered by mail, email, fax, telephone or face to face.

Most organisations have set procedures for delivering information to clients by these various methods. If information is emailed, mailed or faxed, include company details on files and documents.

When talking to clients on the telephone:

- greet the person you have called
- give your name
- give the name of your organisation
- explain the reason for the call.

Work with teams to resolve difficulties

All workers encounter problems they cannot solve alone. For example, you need confidential information about a staff member but do not have access to the password to obtain it from their file; you need access to the internet but the system is down; you cannot interpret a complicated graph.

People working together on a problem benefit from the experience of others who have encountered the same or similar difficulties. Working on problems collaboratively, recognising expertise wherever it resides in an organisation and sharing this expertise are the keys to turning information into knowledge in an organisation.

If you are given a task of collecting, analysing or organising information but strike difficulties, you can ask team members to help you. Always be courteous, speak clearly and listen carefully to their response. They may be able to:

- help solve the problem
- provide encouragement
- give constructive feedback.

Example: work together to resolve a difficulty

A number of team members are working on writing different parts of a report. They need to agree on where to save their collective work, how to name the documents so that other team members can access them and how they will keep track of the latest versions of each document.

The team leader suggests the best way to address the issue of how to manage common files is to have a meeting where everyone can contribute to the solutions. As a team, they all agree to:

- create common directories on the computer server so common files can be assessed easily
- save particular files to a common directory
- put version numbers on documents so everyone can see which document is the most up to date and update common files weekly
- make individual documents ‘read only’ so they cannot be modified by unauthorised people
- review individual files monthly and decide what is to be done with this information.

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Optical disks
Optical disks are known as CD-ROMs (compact disk – read only memory) or DVDs (digital versatile disk). They can store large quantities of information. While they are decreasing in usage, some organisations use CD-ROMs to store reference materials and data in a compact and convenient form. They are also used in the education industry to store interactive training applications. CD-ROMs are portable, small and can conveniently be used to back up important files.
Magnetic tape
This is a storage device used mainly for backing up information from a file server, but is becoming obsolete. Magnetic tape comes in the form of cassettes and cartridges for personal computers, and tape reels and cartridges for mainframe computers. Small cartridges can store over 100 gigabytes of information.

Store information using filing systems

Some organisations store all of their information together in one large centralised filing system, while others use a decentralised filing system where each department or section of the organisation stores its own records. Some organisations combine centralised and decentralised systems; records that are relevant to the whole organisation are centrally controlled, while records relevant to only one or two departments are held in those departments so they are easy to access. There may be an index to the decentralised filing system in the central filing area so files of either system can be located by anyone who needs them.

Some workplaces provide an explanation of the filing system in a policies and procedures manual, or there may be a separate user manual for different filing systems. Often staff can also provide assistance.

You need to be familiar with the filing systems, security procedures and safe recording practices.

Learning checkpoint 2
Organise information

This learning checkpoint allows you to review your skills and knowledge in organising information.

Part A

Read the scenario, then answer the questions that follow.

Scenario

Your manager has asked you to collect information from a new printing company about printing costs for your organisation's annual hard-copy catalogue. You are to compare these costs with those of the printing company that currently prints the catalogue and present the information at a managers' meeting.

1. List at least three questions you need to ask yourself before you gather the information, about who the information is for and how you will organise it. Write a possible answer for each question.

2. What software applications will you use to present the information?

Example: keep records up to date

Pacemaker Shoes Goods return form			
Product	**Description of fault**	**Resolution**	**Signed**
'Surefoot' running shoes	Sole came loose after three wears	Sent out new pair, contacted manufacturer	MW
'Blue Lagoon' sandals	Broken strap	Returned to manufacturer	CM
'Dorothy' casual shoes	One shoe different size	Replaced with right size	RC

Use feedback from quality assurance data

Quality assurance (QA) data is important to most organisations aiming for high production standards. In some organisations, a QA team is responsible for making sure all products or services supplied to customers meet the required standards. For example, a software company would use QA testing procedures to ensure its software products perform as expected.

QA data provides information about the quality of an organisation's products or services. This provides valuable feedback to the organisation as to whether it is meeting customer expectations, as well as identifying opportunities for improvement.

For example, an organisation that supplies goods, such as clothing, may learn from QA testing procedures that an undesirably high percentage of the clothing is subject to shrinkage. The organisation may then use this information to decide that more stringent requirements need to be specified to the fabric provider.

Use feedback to check information processes

Results from surveys, complaints forms, emails and discussions should be collated, organised and presented to management in a useable way.

An organisation may find that, although it is constantly receiving feedback, this does not tell it what it needs to know; for example, the information may be irrelevant or not comprehensive enough to enable any kind of judgment. The organisation may decide that it needs to improve its feedback forms in order to receive quality feedback.

Review information needs

You need to determine whether you have accurately identified the information that was needed. Was the recipient of the information able to make appropriate decisions based on the information provided?

Identifying information needs should be a principal goal. Unfortunately, this stage often does not get the attention it deserves. Many assumptions are made about the information needed. Never assume anything and always check with the appropriate people. Below are some typical questions that should be asked to review information needs.

Questions to ask to review information needs
• What was the exact information requirement? • Why was the information needed? • What organisation or department goals did this information contribute to? • What information is used or needed in order to make decisions? • How was the information need communicated? • Who else might need information in this area? • How accessible is the available information? • What information is currently available?

Review how information is collected

Information is collected from many different sources, including emails, reports, customer records and surveys, telephone calls, meetings, informal and formal communication networks, journals and computer sources. Use the questions that follow to begin the review.

Questions to ask for an information review
• Was the right information collected? • Were the right questions asked? • Where did the information reside? • Were all sources of information explored? • How was the information collected? • What search techniques were used? • What technology was used? • How timely was the information? • How long did it take to collect the information? • How can all the above be done better in the future?

Review how information is maintained and updated

Review whether the information required high maintenance and a lot of updating, and consider the best way of doing this. Ask the following questions:

- Did the information need regular updating or was it a one-off update?
- Who was responsible for updating the information?
- How could information updates be improved in the future?

Review how information is stored

Review whether the information was stored appropriately. If your review finds that information was difficult to locate and access, then you know storage could be a problem. Ask the questions that follow.

Review information storage processes
What system/s was the information stored on?
Was the storage tool appropriate for the type of information?
Who else needed to access this information?
How easy was it to obtain the information from storage?
How was the information backed up?
How easy was it to recover information from the backup tool or storage site?
What new storage technologies are being developed to store information in the future?
Have advances in technology provided a cheaper backup medium than is currently being used?
Is information stored off-site as well as on-site for risk management purposes?

Conduct an information needs analysis

An information needs analysis identifies the future information needs of an organisation. This analysis provides a framework within which you can proactively plan for the future. A needs analysis may involve observation, individual research and a series of meetings where you gather information through interviews and brainstorming sessions.

A needs analysis asks two main questions: What information do we have now? What information do we want to have?

The shortfall between these two questions provides the necessary direction on which to focus your energies.

Questions to ask include those listed below.

Information needs analysis
• What type of information is needed? What is required in the short, medium and long term? Are there gaps in the current information? • Do people know where information can be found? How can existing information be used better? • How often is stored information accessed? If information is not frequently used, it should be discarded. If used often, find out why, how often, how and by whom. • Are there any concerns about the sharing of information? • How is current data obtained and used, and should the source base be widened for the future? What information might be available in the next three to five years? • How quickly might information be needed in the future and what would be the best way of ensuring needs are met on time? • How can the organisation ensure the information it receives and provides is of consistently high quality? • Is the information presented in the required format/s? • How can better relationships be forged between those who provide information and those who use it? • What are the likely costs involved in meeting future information needs and can the organisation afford to meet these or afford not to?

Document future needs

The results of an information needs analysis and review are recorded and used to make decisions.

Results are collated into a document for those with authority, such as supervisors and managers, to use to make decisions based on the result findings. You can use media such as word processing documents, spreadsheets and databases to ensure information regarding the future needs of the organisation is presented clearly and is easy to understand.

Summary

1. Reviewing information is an important part of the information management cycle.
2. A review should assess the quality of information, as well as the processes of identifying, collecting, organising, using, presenting, updating and storing information.
3. Feedback from customers, colleagues and reports is an important part of reviewing information to ensure clarity, accuracy, sufficiency and relevance.
4. Identifying future information needs is vital to the continued success of an organisation. Future information needs can be identified using information reviews and information needs analyses.
5. Documenting the future information needs of an organisation is important. Reports and other visual representations of data should be included when you are presenting findings and making recommendations to managers.