

Power to the people: Cues, cravings, rewards and habit loops

Received: 23rd January, 2013



Mary Ann Williams

holds a master of science in information from the University of Michigan School of Information. Currently the Digital Asset Manager at Guthy-Renker, Mary Ann was previously the Digital Archivist at the Disney Animation Research Library and Disney Online. Her expertise is in change management and improving interpersonal communication for more harmonious collaboration. She has lectured on the topic of change management to a variety of audiences, including the Henry Stewart DAM conference in Los Angeles and the San Diego Special Libraries Association, and has been featured in the American Libraries Association publication 'I Love Libraries'. Mary Ann also provides private coaching in communication skills to executives and business leaders in small and medium-sized half-day workshops.

Tel: +1 818 4330740; E-mail: SchoolOfMoxie@yahoo.com

Abstract Changing user behaviour to encourage positive attitudes towards adopting new workflows and digital asset management (DAM) systems can make or break the success of the DAM in any organisation. This paper aims to focus on the art of interpersonal communication via heuristic models, which reflect the dirt in the trenches of everyday work in a real-life corporate setting. References will be drawn from popular publications as examples of highly accessible resources that can be easily understood and accepted by non-academics performing the daily functions with DAM, and by people who use assets managed in a DAM. Understanding the power and ubiquity of habits is key to breaking through the barrier of DAM user adoption. This paper also aims to inspire DAM administrators and decision makers to focus on the people (users) first, technology (DAM) second, and with the realisation that change is an ever-evolving process, which requires patience and time.

KEYWORDS: digital asset management, change management, habits, interpersonal communication, people skills

HABITS ARE NOT UNIQUE

Technology is a seductive thing: the beautiful bells and whistles of a DAM can promise the moon, the stars, and sometimes, heaven itself. Reality is another story. In reality, a DAM is just a tool — without active use by users who understand and champion the system, the magical DAM can, all too easily, become another piece of junk among other abandoned software and systems (sold so

excellently by salespersons) that target the unrealised desires of an institution. Every institution hopes for a big return on investment with their DAM system, but there is often great frustration with the people part of the equation. The solution to user adoption of the DAM might appear to be as rare and elusive as a magic bean, but in reality it simply requires a focus on the users and their psychology, rather than on the financial

and technical requirements of the system.

Users are the key to a successful DAM or any other means of organising and sharing data. However, users are also bound by their habits, unaware that their unconscious desire for old, familiar patterns may be hurting their chances of better results and thus, better adoption of the DAM. Research shows, ‘... that more than 40 percent of the actions people performed each day weren’t actual decisions, but habits’.¹ On a heuristic level, it does not take science to know and understand that habits are often hard to break. Some habits are positive and healthy — in some cases habits encourage the growth of an individual, bringing forth amazing creative clarity. Twyla Tharp, one of the greatest choreographers in the modern age, describes using an actual box (just an average box file) as a habit of organising her creative ideas. She says, ‘Before you can think out of the box, you have to start with a box.’² Tharp’s use of a simple, ordinary box file underscores the value of a clear and simple habit that reaps great rewards.

In the business world, David Allen has built an empire on the art of ‘Getting Things Done’ — he calls it ‘the art of stress-free productivity’ and what he is really selling is (better) habit building. Allen introduces a five-step ‘workflow’ as a personal tool; a personal habit that one must build to stay stress-free and hopefully more successful in business and life.³ Allen’s habit-building empire is akin to other organising methods, such as Franklin-Covey⁴ or Rolodex⁵ or Filofax.⁶ All of them are physical and digital tools that reinforce habits meant to encourage a more efficient life.

Tharp and Allen both demonstrate that effective habit building and reinforcement not only provides smoother productivity and workflow, but that positive habits create the ability to produce great work,

better collaboration, and higher return on investment.

HABITS ARE PREDICTABLE

Habits do not present any mystery. Each of us is human, which means we each have habits that we perform each and every day. Duhigg describes our natural human routines as a process of ‘chunking’ in which we function through series of actions as an automatic routine (ref. 1, p. 17). ‘Chunking’ is an important concept to understand because DAM users do this when performing routine actions with company assets. The chunking process is what gives many DAM users great consternation when any old tool or method is changed, as they have their preferred series of actions (habits) that they follow to get from task A to task B. Often, DAM users will perform actions one particular way not because it is the most efficient, but because their chunking sequence is the only way they were able to memorise the actions.

The act of chunking can be either positive or negative. It is hoped that users will change their string of habits with ease when a DAM system is introduced to their set of tools in their daily workflow. It is hoped users’ chunking behaviour follows that matching the recommended needs for successful use of the DAM, which are set in place by DAM administrators. For some users, the ability to adjust habits is relatively easy, and they are able to adjust their chunking sequence to incorporate the functions needed to coexist peacefully with a DAM. These users who adapt with ease often become power users of the DAM, and help evangelise wider adoption of the system amongst their peers.

On the negative side, introducing a new tool such as a DAM, inevitably creates disruption to users’ chunking habits and many users do not easily accept the

disruption. In the behaviour loop of a habit (ref. 1, p.19), the DAM is the change agent that breaks the old habit loop. A broken loop results in either a delayed reward or no reward (until the new behaviour is learned), and, quite logically, lack of reward leads to unhappy users.

Every organisation has different workflows, which can also be called ‘habit loops.’ On a higher level, the organisational habit loops influence the individual user habit loops by creating a craving for the individual (ref. 1, p. 33). For example, a craving could be earning a paycheque. The craving is what fuels user habits in the same way that cravings fuel all other habits in life. When thinking of the organisation’s DAM, the administrator must think of the DAM in terms of cravings, rewards, and the subsequent habit loops (ref. 1, p.36). There must be a clear cue, or in other words, a need that the user feels strongly about. For example, an obvious cue would be simply finding available assets for projects. Then, there must be a clear reward, such as clearly marked assets that provide deadlines met in a timely manner.

Duhigg explains:

‘why habits are so powerful: They create neurological cravings. Most of the time, these cravings emerge so gradually that we’re not really aware they exist, so we’re often blind to their influence. But as we associate cues with certain rewards, a subconscious craving emerges in our brains that starts the habit loop spinning.’ (ref. 1, pp. 47–48)

LEARNING NEW (AND IMPROVED) TRICKS

If user behaviour is determined by habit loops, it is logical that changing the loop will help users accept the DAM system and the changed workflows that accompany it. Changing behaviour loops requires finesse in interpersonal skills. DAM administrators must always keep in

mind that people come first, not in the sense that users are entitled to any and all desires, but rather in that users’ ability to change their habit loops successfully should be the foremost goal. Helping users change their habit loops might require some adjustments and modifications to the DAM configuration to improve the users’ success with the system. However, being aware of users’ habit loops helps to determine if their requests are with or without valuable merit.

The key to changing users’ habit loops is to change their routine while leaving the old cue and reward intact (ref. 1, p. 62). Using the same cue and reward, above, the difference in habit loops can be compared in the following examples:

Example of the old habit loop

- 1 *Cue:* find assets.
- 2 *Old routine:* search for assets on old file server without metadata.
- 3 *Reward:* find assets and get work done.

Example of new habit loop

- 4 *Cue:* find assets.
- 5 *New routine:* search for assets on DAM with searchable metadata.
- 6 *Reward:* find assets and get work done.

The casual observer might question if the old routine and new routine have enough valuable difference to create incentive for change. At this point, the wise DAM administrators would know that users’ cravings also change with the new habit loop. Fringe benefits of using a DAM that do not exist in organisations without a DAM, may include such things as:

- decrease in the amount of time it takes to find assets;
- more accurate search results;
- immediate knowledge (via metadata) of an asset’s use rights;
- reduction in the need to correct work on projects.

These types of DAM fringe benefit can create cravings such as:

- praise for a job well done;
- taking credit for success of the project;
- earning a paycheque;
- enjoying leadership responsibilities and value to the organisation as an asset owner;
- faster completion of projects and meeting deadlines on time or earlier than when using old project workflow.

THE ART OF FAILURE

One of the most difficult lessons for DAM administrators is that sometimes users need to fail. They need to miss the deadline, or miscommunicate for (it is to be hoped) the final time, or fail publicly enough to help them recognise on their own that their habit(s) must change. As a DAM administrator, part of the wisdom is knowing when to step in to prevent catastrophic failure and when to be a Zen master while patiently waiting for the failure to occur, so that positive change can be coaxed from the ashes of defeat.

For DAM managers and leaders, understanding failure is a powerful change agent and highly effective as a last resort for the most stubborn users, who have difficulty with any kind of change. An even more powerful tool for DAM managers and leaders is to build a trusted team of asset administrators that can help build a better DAM through the regular examination of user habits associated with the DAM. Twyla Tharp provides us with a powerful exercise in failure. She says, 'By acknowledging failure, you take the first step to conquering it (ref. 2, p. 228). In the exercise, she encourages the development of a 'validation squad', which is, essentially, a team of trusted people who can be relied upon for regularly scheduled critiques during the creative process (ref. 2, p. 229).

Some of the best team members for the validation squad include the DAM power users, who are the most loyal and early adopters of the DAM. These users are often the same individuals who found changing their habit loops a much more agreeable process and can offer key insight into why stubborn users may have more difficulty compared with others. One of the most important things a DAM administrator will ever do is 'educate up'. This important function requires communication to company leaders about the patience needed for allowing DAM users time to change their habit loops and build successful change in both individual and collaborative workflows. It should be obvious at this point, that changing habit loops is a process that does not happen instantaneously.

START DOING

Change is slow. It happens at a rate that is often frustratingly sluggish to many organisation leaders. After looking at the intricacies of habit loops and neurological cravings, we can see how if users do not change old habit loops, they are not able to make room in their automatic routines for the new processes that inherently come with the addition of a DAM system.

It has also been seen how other disciplines from the arts to business use the power of habit to increase productivity. These examples show how habits are not to be feared, but are better when understood so that the power of habits can be maximised. The secret of change management lies in the people who are affected by the change, whether it is from a DAM system or any other change agent that alters a previously automatic workflow (now also known as a habit loop) in the organisation.

Highly accessible publications as a method of explaining habits have been looked at, with the goal that both DAM

administrators and organisation leaders will be able easily to accept and grab onto the concepts for habits and how they can be manipulated and maximised for effective change. The accessibility of the resources makes it possible to relate the concepts of habits to real-world applications more easily. It can easily be seen that change is doable and can be less traumatic than it may be if users are not allowed to find ways that agree with them to change their habit loops. In other words, when change is dictated down the ladder of authority, users may hear the orders but not adapt as effectively as when they are given an

agreeable new routine to satisfy their existing cues and rewards.

References

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- 4 Franklin-Covey: see <http://franklinplanner.fcorgp.com/store/index.jsp>
- 5 Rolodex: see <http://rolodex.com/yourlife/Pages/why-Rolodex.aspx>
- 6 Filofax: see <http://www.filofaxusa.com/>