

Information and Credibility: What's the Link?

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The ability to access and filter pertinent information from the market and our own organisations will have quite an impact on our credibility, which in turn will impact our careers. But how?

"Trying to understand the events in your time period is like trying to read a billboard by standing 10 cm away from it."
Dan Carlin @dcommonsense

Working in a corporate environment usually means working in a place replete with information. Formal company and industry announcements, harmless and not-so-harmless gossip, peer to peer information, rumours, hearsay. It all has an ability to influence your decision-making and, over the long term, it will have an effect on your career, and this can be positive or negative, depending on how seriously you manage it.

It is critical that we develop strategies to effectively curate information which can help or harm perceptions of you as a professional.

My daughter is struggling to understand why she is cautioned against taking the news she sees on television for granted. "The news does not always present the truth," we tell her, as parents. The truth is an important concept to a 13 year old. It is interesting to witness a teenager trying to interpret the world, while we adults warn her not to believe everything she sees and hears on television or in the news, a world which is also run by grown-ups.

Like the nightly news, most of the information we encounter in our working environment comes from secondary or tertiary sources, that is, we get our information indirectly from the players in the drama via a news item. For example, a journalist currently in Nepal shares a story about an earthquake survivor, which the journalist prepared after speaking with an eyewitness. Her report is then edited, probably abridged or condensed, before it is publicly presented via a news broadcast, or newspaper article.

That is a lot of filtering here. Who is the primary source? It could be argued that the rescued person is actually the primary source, so we need to consider there are three filters at play in this example.

How much of the original story still exists?

In many cases, of course this doesn't matter. It is not necessary to be at an oil company head office in order to report accurately that petrol prices have risen, or be present at the Bureau of Meteorology to know it is raining.

But there are events, especially big corporate events such as attempted company acquisitions, share price

fluctuations, product withdrawals, big financial market movement and, outside the commercial world, events such as natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or war, where a primary source can be invaluable.

During the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, respected correspondent journalists were on the ground, including in Baghdad during the 2003 invasion and more recently in Afghanistan and back in Iraq and Syria analysing the threat of ISIS.

These journalists, brave men and women, have covered most of conflicts since the Great War early in the 20th century. These events were witnessed first-hand via their presence as journalists. They real light into what were highly confusing, dangerous and conflicting situations. Yes, that light had a Western perspective, and we should also acknowledge that unavoidable cultural filter.

War Correspondents often brought a viewpoint to readers that did not always reflect those of the government of the day. Journalists were also primary sources.

If we are interested in what is happening in the world or in our own industries, we now have to do what journalists used to do, which is sifting and selecting from a range of sources, in our case they are mostly online sources, to gain a broad and balanced perspective of any given event. We can no longer rely on the mainstream media broadcasts to keep up with industry, world or national events.

With few exceptions, mainstream news is now reported with selective story prioritisation, limited relevant detail, and little context. What we do get is armchair

opinion in the form of numerous columns. Many people today, mistakenly, rely on this opinion as their most trusted news source.

I wonder how many people we work with do the same?

Okay, but how is this relevant to my career?

What does this all mean for us as executives steering a career course and trying to navigate the various political manoeuvrings of our peers and superiors?

One word: Credibility. Credible people are treated seriously, credible people are given greater opportunities.

At a geopolitical level, for example, misinformation can be deliberately spread, for internal political reasons in the case of many western democracies, and for even more nefarious reasons in countries controlled by authoritarian regimes. This is also true of company environments, which are traditionally not hotbeds of democracy.

If we accept that unbiased information flows are impossible to come by, we at least begin with a more robust mindset. After all, the spin around any event wasn't invented recently. It has been with us from the time more than two people were camped around a single fire.

As an executive working within a corporate environment can closely observe how an internal or external event will be interpreted and communicated by their own company.

We may already recognise certain catch-phrases and corporate clichés that are unique to our own company. Phrases such as “Doing more with less” for an austerity program to reduce overhead costs, or “One kitchen many dining rooms” for describing a shared services model.

This is not a bad thing. Companies, especially multinational corporations, are dealing with a diverse geographic and cultural audience of employees, customers and investors, so language that illustrates and reinforces the culture they are trying to build is critical.

The audience for these messages will have been stratified, prioritised and channelled into senior company executives, middle and junior executives, remaining staff, shareholders, analysts, geographies, the business press, and sometimes the broader general public.

Wait, there’s more.

The amount of internal and external information available to enterprising executives is unlimited.

Selecting reliable intelligence sources and avoiding unsubstantiated or untrustworthy gossip is critical for career success. It may only happen once or twice in any given career, but gaining an early insight into a piece of legitimate organisational or commercial intelligence, and prudently acting on it, can offer huge advantages.

This is no Machiavellian insight. Acting on sensitive information which is shared in confidence can be a career killer, too.

But how does spin affect me as an executive?

Johnson & Johnson’s Tylenol product withdrawal in the 1990s in the USA is a case in point. A blackmail threat to poison the popular headache tablets saw J&J order the immediate withdrawal of all Tylenol products in the market. The long-term effect of J&J’s decision was that massive public support ensued for this seemingly altruistic decision, ensuring Tylenol’s even greater market share after the event.

The message from J&J’s successful product withdrawal is clear: the potential risks of putting too much spin, or departing too far from the facts, is nowadays increased by the enormous number of alternative online news sources that can be utilised for verification. An original message can disappear altogether. One only has to watch the reporting of the same event by two different news channels to understand that.

Johnson & Johnson chose to focus on the safety of their customers first rather than trying to spin the event. The outcome was an unexpectedly positive increase in market share and sales revenue.

If experienced and highly sceptical journalists are susceptible to being spun by governments and large corporations who have far greater resources, how does an executive manage the information that comes her or his way?

The challenge of disseminating and understanding institutional information may be in our acceptance that we consume drastically increasing amounts

of secondary and tertiary material. In the corporate world, that information often comes via the CEO, filtered through a communications professional first.

Okay, but what are the parallels for the office environment?

When we think about it, there are a number of people amongst our own peers who communicate in a similar way to opinionated columnists and shock jocks.

If we think about where the majority of company gossip and information comes from, it will be a person or small number of people who provide much of the informal intelligence we hear, depending on the size of the company.

Sometimes it is a deliberate strategy of the person to position themselves as a company insider, someone who has the connections and is in the know, but in reality it is inadvertent.

The danger of accepting information disseminated by uninformed people, whether it is about a personal matter, industry or company gossip, is that we may be influenced by that information in our decision-making.

How accurate is the information? From where did that person get the information? Is it credible, or is this person passing on news that was generated by another executive for other purposes, nefarious or harmless?

If the intelligence is wrong, how should that affect my use of it? What are the consequences of acting on it? Perhaps I ought to double-check this with someone I trust before I act on the information.

What about company announcements?

It is important to filter all company announcements. Most information from large organisations will have been released after consultation with a professional communications team, which means a certain amount of gloss will have been added to maximise positives and minimise and downplay negatives, depending on the audience.

After all, spooking employees, customers and investors is not a good move.

With the proliferation of online information, now delivered instantly thanks to smart phones, we often have the ability to confirm some stories and announcements quite quickly. But we also have access to limitless information, so source selection is critical.

If I happen to hear from a colleague that a senior leader in the company has been dismissed, it is likely I will disseminate that intelligence to my own peer network as it may have an effect on our business or organisation, or it may offer me an opportunity to step up the ladder.

Should I quickly make contact with the company's relevant leaders to remind them of my capabilities and my energy and ambition, or would I appear exploitative?

If the intelligence is subsequently proven to be false, I may lose credibility, and my own influence may be damaged. I am also less likely to trust my initial information source again. So who do I find to trust?

So if we recognise that most of our important organisational and business-related news comes from secondary and tertiary sources, we must accept that we will be interpreting a filtered and sometimes skewed version of any given event.

Alternatively, if we treat all information with scepticism, and challenge the source of all information that may be important to us, we will ultimately make far more informed and consistent decisions, and this can only benefit us and our careers.

Understanding how intelligence is used to influence perception is a highly valuable tool for any executive when making organisational or business decisions. The more an executive can appreciate the context of each announcement or communication, the greater will be that person's ability to develop and progress within their environment.

It takes a lot of work, but by proactively managing intelligence that comes our way by analysing its provenance, and determining how it may play out in the longer term we build our own personal credibility, and we are already making

progress towards taking control of our own career.

A Simple Intelligence Management Checklist:

- Is the information credible? Do I trust the source? Is it from a primary source? Is there a potentially hidden agenda in this information?
- Is the intelligence of a personal nature? How will propagating personal information affect perceptions of me as a professional? Could this damage my credibility?
- Will acting on this information affect my organisational or commercial decision-making? What are the risks if the information is wrong or inaccurate?
- Will sharing this information help me and my level of credibility within the organisation? Or could it potentially damage me?



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Steve has led hundreds of search assignments, assisting large multinationals and smaller local companies alike to attract high calibre senior executives to roles in regional, country and general management, sales and marketing, business unit management, finance, medical affairs, regulatory affairs, clinical R&D, market access, consulting, and human resources. He is widely considered one of the region's best connected Life Science professionals.

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