

Executive **EDGE**

BATTLING THE PAPER TIGER

In our society, where information equals power, busy executives have to fight information overload anxiety—an obsessive tendency to read everything. So-called cures for this disease include using a timer to limit the perusal of each periodical, only reading the *World Almanac* once a year, and subscribing to abstracts and digests.

A more satisfying solution, however, is available. A fat-free reading plan can enable sufferers from this disorder to pare down excess publications while meeting their basic minimum infor-

mation requirement. The diet includes:

- Newspaper—one daily, preferably the less bulky *Wall Street Journal*
- News magazine—just one, probably *Newsweek*, which has fewer empty calories
- General culture and ideas—on Sunday, the *New York Times*, but read with caution and only after removing the bulk such as travel pages and linguistic ads
- Reference books—an untrendy but comprehensive dictionary, such as *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*



David Tillinghast

Those who have gotten their reading habits under control may supplement the diet with management and business magazines, such as

Fortune, *Forbes*, and *Business Week*, or publications on science and technology, such as *Science* and *Scientific American*.

From Warren Bennis, "The Executive's Fat-Free Reading Diet," *Executive Female*, July-August 1993, pp. 45-47. Reprinted from Warren Bennis, *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change*, Addison-Wesley, 1993.

HIGH-TECH BRAINSTORMING

The technology age has finally brought an answer to those boring, overlong, fruitless meetings, dominated by the loudest or the most powerful. A new type of software—group decision support system (GDSS)—enables participants to type their ideas or reactions on keyboards. The comments appear on all participants' screens, as well as on a large monitor at one end of the table. GDSS can give a clear picture of what everyone thinks—displaying comments, counting votes, calculating priorities, and allocating money among projects.

Users of GDSS have found myriad benefits. One person cannot dominate the meeting or intimidate those who are shyer or at a lower level. Thus more ideas can be generated in a shorter time. "With anonymity, the ideas become more important than who said them or how they were said," according to Susanna Oppen, president of a consulting firm that focuses on groupware.

GDSS also enables participants to avoid com-

mon decision-making pitfalls, such as the "Abilene paradox"—where everyone agrees to a solution (a "trip to Abilene"), even though no one thinks it is a good idea—and the "football phenomenon"—where confusion during the last five minutes of the meeting results in conclusions unconnected to the preceding discussion. And it provides a record of the meeting to prevent disagreements later.

On the negative side, high-level executives, who tend to be less computer literate, may not accept the technology and may object to the way it flattens the playing field. And although shyer people are more likely to speak up, those with strong verbal skills may be frustrated and offer less input. In addition, meeting participants may feel they accomplish more using the technology, but meeting experts caution that the quality of the ideas may not be any better.

At least four different companies are marketing GDSS software. GroupSystems V, starting at about \$25,000, captures anonymous ideas from

a group and runs on a network. OptionFinder, available for \$9,000 and up, calculates and displays votes from up to 250 users. CM/1, priced at \$1,500 and up, provides a graphic "map" to meetings that allows groups to collaborate and organize ideas. Finally, VisionQuest, priced from \$400 to \$3,000 and up, allows anonymous brainstorming, voting, allocation, and documentation.

For the most part, experts recommend using a combination of electronic brainstorming and normal discussion. Some companies only use the electronic voting keypads, which are less likely to disrupt the meeting. Even though such devices level the hierarchy for discussion purposes, the decision making may still be done in the same old way: by the person or persons at the top. And many traditional meeting dos and don'ts still apply: use a facilitator, set clear goals, and be prepared to change gears if the process is not working.

From Alice LaPlante, "90s Style Brainstorming," *Forbes* ASAP, October 25, 1993, pp. 45-61.