EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The need for information specialists is widespread and growing, and it presented itself in discouraging clarity at a state motor vehicle office. The author's daughter was to get her driver's license, prepared with necessary paperwork and a scheduled appointment, but no preparation could contend with the disarray, lines and lack of organization, signage and information on site. Reassurance from help desk staff was false and misleading. The visit, though ultimately successful, was frustrating, full of wasted time and a stark reminder of the prevalence of bad, poorly presented or missing information without enough information specialists to fix it all. A book by Abby Covert, *How to Make Sense of Any Mess*, presents useful advice for information professionals facing everyday information challenges.

KEYWORDS

organization of information

sense making

information professionals

Everyone's Job: Making Sense of the Mess

by Laura Creekmore

The longer I do this work, the more I see the need. Throughout our varied work in the information fields, we spend a lot of time dealing with both the details and the big ideas. We think about the theories of categorization. We contemplate the many ways to structure metadata. We focus on the psychology of learning. These insights help us better meet the information needs of our audiences: our readers, our researchers, our colleagues, our clients.

But every day, I'm reminded again how much our work is needed by the world. How much more work there is to do.

At the beginning of the summer, I took my daughter to get her driver's license. While she'd received a learner's permit a year ago to allow her to *learn* to drive, now it was time for her to get the *real* license, to be able to drive on her own.

We received our first information related to the experience by word of mouth. A friend mentioned to me in the spring that he'd been surprised to discover there was a six-week wait to schedule a road test for new drivers, so I should visit the state's website immediately if I hoped for my daughter to take the test and get her license as soon as she was old enough. I was at a baseball game at the time,

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but I was able (with some degree of backtracking and effort, but successful nonetheless) to schedule the appointment right then on my smartphone. Whew!

Each state in the United States has somewhat different rules about how you get a driver's license, and so when it came time for the test, my daughter and I both read the state's website carefully to ensure she had all the necessary paperwork to take with us. In retrospect, it should have been a warning sign when she and I came away with entirely different ideas about what paperwork would be required. We gathered all the documents we each thought we'd need, and we arrived 15 minutes early for her appointment.

When we got there, there was a line out the door, at least half the length of the building down the sidewalk. I asked the people in line, "Do you stand in line if you have an appointment?" No one knew. I looked at the door – no sign or information. I sent my daughter to stand in line, and I went inside to look for more info. Nothing. The long line ended at the Information Desk. There were also dozens of chairs in the room, nearly all of them occupied. I asked a few people inside, and I got both yes and no answers, and several "I have no ideas."

So I broke in the front of the line to ask the woman staffing the information desk whether we needed to stand in line if we already had an appointment. She said, "Yes, but they'll call your name while you're in line."

What?!

That really made no sense to me, but nonetheless, we'd

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received the official word from an employee of the driver's license bureau, so we remained in line for an hour. We finally got to the information desk ourselves, whereupon we were informed we'd missed our appointment.

It turns out they believed they'd called my daughter's name much earlier, while we were in line and listening for them to do so, but the officer who'd called it out so badly mangled it (my daughter's name is even easier to pronounce than mine, though we have different last names), that neither my daughter nor I recognized it as her name. The officer was originally going to make us wait six more weeks for a new appointment, but after begging, pleading and threatening, we managed to convince them they should test her that day. (And she passed the test with flying colors. Thank goodness!) And in the end, they didn't even look at any of the "required" paperwork we brought with us.

When we left, my daughter asked me why I was so angry about the whole thing. After all, it had worked out, and she could now drive!

I told her that it frustrated me that all of the confusion could have been avoided with a little better information. It was obvious to the license bureau staff how the process worked, and based on our conversation, they clearly believed they'd explained it well. Their curse of knowledge prevented them from seeing our confusion. It would have been great to have a sign or two explaining a process that made sense. What if they'd assigned us a reservation number when we made the appointment? What if there had even been a low-tech sheet of paper where we could sign in to let them know we'd arrived? I had many solutions.

We all encounter situations like this on a regular basis. There aren't enough information professionals in the world to fix them all.

That's why I am so fond of Abby Covert's recent book,

How to Make Sense of Any Mess (http://abbytheia.com/makesense/). It ought to be part of the required reading for 101 classes in any information-related discipline. It will have the seasoned professionals among us nodding along on every page. But it's also entirely understandable for someone whose calling in life comes nowhere near our profession. We're all faced with information challenges every day. Most of them are pretty messy.

Covert divides her work into several sections, focusing on identifying the issue, clarifying goals, understanding the audience, getting your arms around the context and building a solid information structure for any project. Then she helps you figure out how to adapt that framework to a rapidly changing world, and most importantly, communicate and collaborate with others.

The highly digestible book treats each page as a mini-essay, with a principle and an explanation. You can dip in to grab an idea or two and get back to work or read the whole thing through in just a couple of hours. I don't think you will, though – it's the kind of book that makes me stop every few pages, because I'm ready to put the ideas to work on a thorny issue I've been dealing with.

The thing is, everyone has to communicate with other humans, every day. And most of the time, we're blissfully unaware whether we're actually speaking the same language. Many times we all may nod in agreement, not realizing we don't fully understand each other.

There will always be a role for information professionals. Our work should be in greater demand every day, as the world grows more complex. But we also ought to continue to find ways to share with others the tools we've learned for sensemaking. Covert's deceptively simple book is a wonderful tool for information pros and laypeople alike. ■

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