

Ignoring Information as a Form of Intelligence

I took my son to get a prescription the other day. We knew exactly what we needed and just had to jump through the protectionist hoops of the cowardly medical cartel to get it.

When the doctor asked about his symptoms, he described at length over a long span of time everything he'd experienced. I wanted to interrupt and just tell her the one-sentence I knew mattered to her in the whole story, but I decided not to. I remember when doctors asked me similar questions in the past, and I thought they needed every detail (probably in part because I assumed they were House-like detectives who would gain insight from the details, instead of mostly disinterested pill pushers.)

With time and experience, I learned which bits of information didn't really matter. Not just talking to doctors, but everywhere.

I worked for a guy who had me scan and summarize every piece of incoming mail as if they were of equal importance. He'd double check to make sure I hadn't discarded anything without running it by him. It was a huge time suck. Then I worked for a guy who was the total opposite. He'd get annoyed if I brought anything to his attention that wasn't totally and completely interesting, urgent, and relevant. That's when I realized that probably 90% of incoming mail is useless.

In fact, 90% of pretty much any incoming information is useless.

If not useless, at least not actionable, and certainly not worthy of mention in conversations or meetings meant to drive action.

I've seen my kids provide way too much information in several situations, and I have too. The inability to spot useless information is a sign of a young mind. The more intelligence is developed, the more information gets left out. People who tell you only the parts that really matter have a kind of genius.

I know time and experience are needed to develop this kind of omission intelligence. I'm not sure if there are other ways to enhance it, or to what extent certain people are predisposed to it. But it's subtle and very valuable.

I'm sure you can think of all kinds of worries and dangers in becoming good at ignoring things. Perhaps there are some. It's not the only kind of intelligence, but it definitely is a kind of intelligence.