



## Stanford eCorner

### The Importance of Selective Information

Carly Fiorina, *Former CEO, HP*

May 02, 2007

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/1716/The-Importance-of-Selective-Information>

Carly Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett Packard (1999-2005), talks about the importance of being able to distill enormous amounts of information. She explains how her experience in taking courses in Medieval History has helped her look at information selectively, a skill she has successfully applied in her corporate life.



#### Transcript

Almost by accident, I came to a course in Medieval History and Philosophy and found it fascinating. It was fascinating for two reasons, I think. One is because it was interesting to me even then, what happens, how does it happen that people who are enlightened, and optimistic, and focused on the future lose all of that and go into a period of darkness and fear. And how do they come back out of that again? And that is, in fact, what Medieval History is all about. But I also learned something about dealing with overwhelming amounts of information. Now, you know, this was quite a long time ago. Just to date myself, I graduated in 1976. I'm a grandmother, just so you get the picture here. And someone asked me, actually, were there women's organizations here at Stanford when I was here. And I said, honestly, I don't know.

We didn't think about it that way. But one of the things that I learned in this Medieval History course was.... We had to read a work of philosophy every week. Big books, you know, Aquinas, Maimonides. I know, none of these thrills you, but suffice it to say they were books of about a couple thousand pages apiece. And every week, we had to distill those thousands of pages into a two-page paper. And for me, the process was that I would write 20 pages, then I would get it down to 10 pages, and I would get it down to 5, and finally, I would get it down to 2. Which for me, I hope, represented the distilled essence of what I had learned and what I had read. It turns out that that skill has been very useful as I've been through my life. Because all of us are overwhelmed with amounts of information, and there will come any time in anyone's life, whether it's in a course you're taking, or whether it's in a choice you have to make about your life or about your work, where what you're going to have to do is cut through lots of information and distinguish the truly important from the merely interesting.