

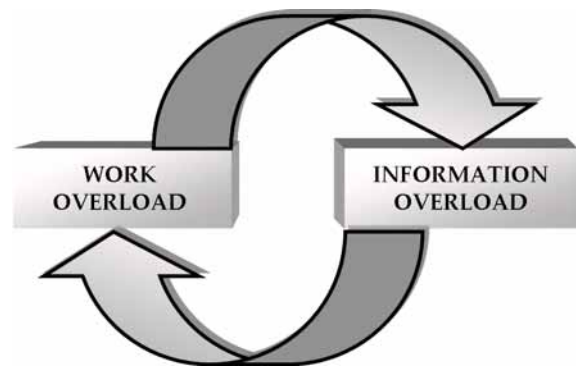
White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload



Basics to Overcoming Overload

How Can You Control The Floodgates That Overload Your World? Martin Luther told us, “I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off.” Using practical thoughts and tips we will show you how to control the sources of overload.

In a knowledge based economy, leaders and knowledge workers face a highly interdependent relationship between work overload and information overload. Here, our objective is to help you identify the sources of information overload and control them. We believe that as you manage the sources of information overload you can control work overload as a natural by-product.



As knowledge workers, information enters your world in various ways. The most common are: **e-mail, telephone, paper, and meetings** including one-on-one encounters and **interruptions**. In the coming chapters we will provide some thoughts and tips on how to deal practically and easily with each of these.

Just as with previous sections of this book, please note that we are not presenting a program or a system but a set of “Lego” building blocks. Select what is most appropriate for you and what you can adapt to suit your own needs and style. There will always be exceptions to every rule. Do not let concerns for the exceptions direct and limit your thinking or your personal search for solutions.

Our minds have an amazing capacity to capture images and events and to retain them. Our minds can be likened to a camera that is always on. Everything that comes into our world through our senses is captured and stored indefinitely. The more we focus on an issue, data, or image, the deeper it is ingrained in our minds. Each of these exposures consumes mental energy and occupies storage space in our brain.

Note:

* This whitepaper is extracted from our book *Overloaded? From overload to balanced living*. See inside the book at www.amazon.com

* If this page was sent to you by a friend we invite you to subscribe to our e-letter “On The Road To Overcoming Overload.”

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As another illustration, our minds are also like a disk drive on a computer. Scientists believe that even before our birth the mind captures sounds and memories of the world around us. This continues without ever deleting anything. Over time our data storage becomes crowded and overloaded. Regretfully, science has not found any delete buttons allowing us to purge our brains of unnecessary clutter.

One of the symptoms of information overload is difficulty in recalling people's names and details. While aging may be a factor, a key reason is our overcrowded minds. Just like accessing data on a heavily loaded disk drive or finding a document in a disorganized filing cabinet, recalling details from the vast quantity of data stored in our minds takes time and mental energy. This explains the reason why small children can recall details faster than older people. This happens primarily because their storage banks are still uncluttered by the huge amount of exposures accumulated with every passing year.

So what can you do?

Hundreds of years ago Martin Luther said, "I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off."ⁱ Just as you can prevent flying birds from making a nest in your hair you can prevent information exposure from settling in your mind **by tackling it at the source**. Our strategy for controlling the information overload is to attack the sources of unnecessary information before they cement their exposure taking more space and mental energy.

In the coming sections we will give tips for each of the five information sources we referred to earlier. But before we do this, let us share four common tips that apply to all of them. Later, we will highlight these common tips giving you examples of how they apply in your day-to-day life.

First Common Tip: Define your communication protocol and communicate it to your important people. What do we mean by a communication protocol? A protocol is an expected code of conduct or behavior that governs our interactions. For example, when you meet someone in the morning you expect him or her to give a greeting such as "Good morning". If you invite someone to a meeting you expect him or her to attend or express regrets. In years past, when you called someone's office you expected a person to answer the phone. That was in the past. Now, the protocol has changed. Today, more likely, you expect to leave a message on a telephone answering machine hoping that your call will be returned. If there is no answering machine you feel disappointed or frustrated because your communication protocol has been violated.

Ancient Answers to the Information Overload Problem

About 1000 BC – King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said "Be warned: there is no end of opinions ready to be expressed. Studying them can go on forever and become very exhausting!"
Ecclesiastes: 12:12

About 60 - 65 AD – Saint Paul instructs his student, Timothy, saying, "Avoid idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge." 1Timothy: 6:20

From the preceding examples, you will note that, in the absence of agreed-upon standards or social norms, protocol is largely defined by the expectations of the originator. Such expectations may not be compatible with your circumstances and life priorities. Therefore, it is important to define a personal communication protocol compatible with your high value roles. This protocol should be based on reasonable priorities and expectations. To avoid any misunderstanding this protocol should be clearly communicated to your important people.

Second Common Tip: Seek the support of your important people for your new communication protocol. If you have ever tried dieting or losing weight you know that this requires commitment and discipline. You also know that success in such disciplines is made easier when you have the support of the important people in your life. Overcoming overload in an overloaded world is not easy. Overcoming information and work addiction will require changed attitudes and priorities that are made easier if you have the support of your important people.

Your new communication protocols will most likely result in changed behavior. Change is often difficult especially if it requires modified behavior on the part of others. With this in view, it is critical that you negotiate for the support of your important people as you implement your new communication protocol.

Third Common Tip: Batch process because this is more efficient. Years back computer memory and processing power were very expensive. Programmers were very careful not to be wasteful in the use of system resources. As a result, systems were programmed and used in a batch-processing mode. As technology became more abundant and cheap we moved to a high demand, multitasking processing environment. This is often wasteful and less efficient in terms of system resource utilization.

Regretfully, our human mind has a finite capacity. Being stretched and overtaxed we need to move back to a more efficient processing model - batch processing. Try it. You will like it.

The concept of “Batch Processing” is to group similar functions into one common, easy to administer process. This common process helps you concentrate on one type of activity at a time. This, by nature, allows the mind to focus and be more efficient. As you practice batch processing, you become better at estimating the amount of time required to complete such activities. You become better at completing tasks on schedule. This will enhance your confidence and your effectiveness. In the following chapters we will give you examples of how to batch process e-mail, phone calls, paper and even meetings and interruptions.

Fourth Common Tip: Make it a habit; it becomes easier. Those of us who commit to an exercise program know that once it becomes a habit it becomes much easier to keep and maintain. Habits, good or bad, are hard to break. You will also find that others are less likely to challenge you or tempt you to return to your overloaded behavior. People admire and respect disciplined individuals. Good habits communicate consistency and stability that result in an element of security and self-confidence. Good habits will help you feel more in control and reduce the feeling of anxiety that result from our overloaded world.

In the coming sections we will encourage you to develop habitual routines to batch process your e-mail, voice mail, paper and even meetings. Developing a pattern of behavior is healthy and less stressful for you. As a side benefit, you will become more predictable to your team and to those who interact with you regularly.

Summary

- ✓ There are many thoughts and tips that can help you control the sources of work and information overload. Always make sure to personalize the suggested solutions in response to your high value roles, goals, and activities as well as the important people in your life.
- ✓ There are four common tips for handling information sources:
 1. Always seek to define your personal communication protocol and communicate it to your important people.
 2. Seek the support of your important people for your new protocol.
 3. Batch process your information input; it is more efficient and uses less mental and emotional resources.
 4. Whenever possible, make your input processing habitual. This will make the application of new disciplines easier.
- ✓ **Please note:** This section will be of particular value to those who had a high score in Statements 8 to 14 of the [Effectiveness and Overload Gauge](#)

ⁱ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*. Volume 21. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), page 88.