

# White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload



## Filtering On High Value Subjects

### Background

*Can Filtering Help You?* The challenge most of us face is not in choosing between the good and the bad. The challenge is filtering, to choose between the good and the best. Developing your own filtering system will help you focus, prioritize, and choose what is the best.

Most of us develop bad habits not because we desire them, but because we do not have enough motivation to break them or avoid them. We would change our bad habits if we had sufficient rewards from changing them, or if we were faced with the negative consequences of our bad habits. As human beings, we are subject to the law of “the carrot and the stick”.

The motivation to change our overloaded world must come from within each of us. As we think of the ever-looming demand of our growing economy and the increased pressure this will bring, we hope that fear may motivate some of us. As we think of the immense future growth potential, we hope that all of us are challenged by the opportunity we have to bring higher value to society and to those who are important to us. Those of us who accept this challenge will reap great personal rewards and benefits.

In other words, each of us must develop our own motivation based on an honest understanding of the high price we are likely to pay for our overloaded lives if we do not change, and the potential rewards we are likely to gain, if we do change.

The priority based filtering system is a strategic tool that provides a thinking process. We believe that given the opportunity to think carefully, most of us will be motivated to change for the better. Based on our clients’ experiences, as you use this thinking tool, you will develop your own filtering system that will help you **focus on higher value roles, goals, and activities**.

Diagram 4 illustrates the priority based filtering system as a dynamic interrelationship of three critical areas:

1. **Roles and Goals:** Your roles and their related goals are the primary driving force in this filter. Roles are different from job titles and are seldom defined in job descriptions. In our hurried and busy lives we seldom take time to define the roles we play on the stage of

#### Note:

\* This whitepaper is extracted from our book *Overloaded? From overload to balanced living*. See inside the book at [www.amazon.com](http://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.” Please go to <http://www.nomoreoverload.com/request.asp>



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life. We decide and act without regularly examining our actions in relationship to our critical goals. This can change as you define your high value roles relating them to high value goals and use this to help you filter the information you receive and the demands placed on your life.

2. **People:** As a knowledge worker, people are your information exchange partners. The people in your sphere of life are the target and recipients of your value proposition. As you think of people you must include yourself as one of the most important people. Your personal well-being and the information you need for your growth and development are the vehicles by which you provide and increase the value you bring to others in the world around you.

Some may suggest that to think of value as it relates only to people is rather narrow and selfish. While this may be true, we must realize that all things were created to add value to mankind, as mankind assumes the caretaker role for all things created.

3. **Subjects:** The information subjects that you seek and collect are a support infrastructure to help you play your role and achieve your goals and deliver high value to the people around you. In our information-cluttered world we must stop and ask, “How does this information help me relate to my roles and goals and how will this information benefit my interaction with my important people?”

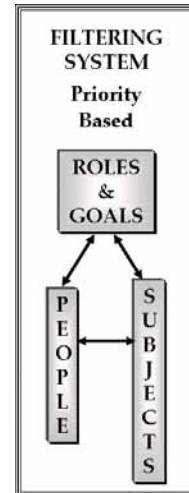


Diagram 4

### Summary

- ✓ We indulge in bad habits when we lack the motivation to focus on what is best.
- ✓ To overcome the overload problem we must individually be motivated by the potential of adding higher value and consider the risks associated with the negative impact of work and information overload.
- ✓ You can filter wisely by relating your high value roles and goals to the people who are your information exchange partners, as well as the subject matter and the information you collect and need to support your roles. Please note:
- ✓ This section will be of particular value to those who had a high score in Statements 1 to 7 of the [Effectiveness and Overload Gauge](#)

## Filtering On High Value Subjects

*What Are The Issues or Subjects That Deserve your Focus and Support Your Roles?* Most of us fall victim to the tyranny of the urgent. In so doing we sacrifice what is often more important. Defining your high value subjects will help you develop an information infrastructure that supports you as you perform your high value roles and achieve your high value goals.

Subjects relate to the activities we engage in every day. Today it seems that our personal and business cultures are driven by urgency. On a given day most of us are confronted with what appears to be urgent matters that call for immediate attention. They force us to change our priorities, disrupt our plans, and cause more stress than we like. Charles Hummel in his booklet, *Tyranny of the Urgent*, writes “But in the light of time’s perspective their deceptive prominence fades; with a sense of loss we recall the important tasks pushed aside. We realize we’ve become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.”<sup>i</sup> Some of us can cope with the tyranny of the urgent better than others. At the same time medical and scientific research confirm that living under a prolonged state of urgency causes more stress than our bodies can tolerate. The results are seen in compromised health and emotional well-being. The objective of this chapter is to help you take control and prioritize life activities filtering on what is important and not what is merely urgent.

Merrill and Donna Douglass as well as Stephen Covey present some interesting thoughts. We recommend reading their books. Here we suggest grouping our daily encounters into four categories as illustrated in Diagram 8.<sup>ii</sup> Plotted against an axis of urgency and an axis of importance you will note the following four:

- 1. Not Urgent and Not Important:** These are time wasters and should be avoided and totally eliminated from your life. These are often driven by the unhealthy motivation of giving in to external temptations. An example of this would be giving in to the strong impulse of having a big hamburger after you finished a healthy dinner, watching a senseless TV program, or spending time reading the “For sale” ads when you have no intention of buying anything.
- 2. Urgent and Not Important:** These should be avoided wherever you can. Most often such urgency here is imposed by an external source and is based on someone else’s priorities or anxiety. An example of this would be persistent telemarketing phone calls that disrupt your quiet, family dinnertime. E-mail that is always labeled URGENT with no apparent reason for that urgency also qualifies.

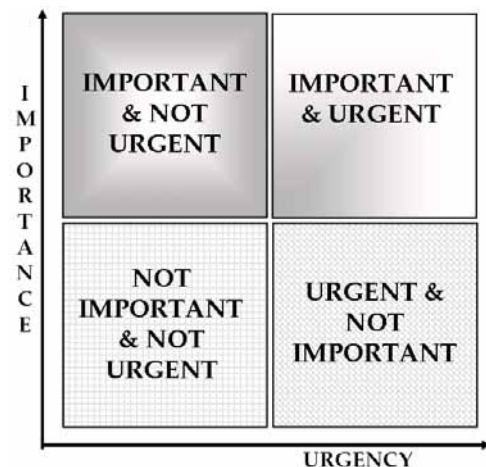


Diagram 8: Important and Urgent

3. **Important and urgent:** These deserve your attention. They could be the result of events beyond your control, poor planning or the fast changing world in which we live. An example of this would include a child falling off a bike and needing immediate medical care, your bank account running on overdraft, or a disruption of your supplier's operation that requires an immediate change to your manufacturing process.
4. **Important and Not Urgent:** These are the important activities that are often neglected or overlooked. These often require an act of a strong will and disciplined self-control based on convictions and commitments. Examples of such activities include thinking and planning, coaching and mentoring your staff, engaging in quality conversation with your spouse or child, paying tribute and saying thanks to a faithful client, acknowledging the goodness of a friend, taking time to energize your mind and spirit...

While the above examples may be simple and clear, often what we confront is not as simple and as clear. As a result, many of us fall victim to the urgent and overlook what is important. "General Eisenhower is quoted as saying, 'The urgent is seldom important, and the important is seldom urgent.' Too often life is controlled by the 'tyranny of the urgent.' We put aside higher and more worthy goals to put out fires." <sup>iii</sup>



My current business role requires me to be very responsive on a very short time basis. In a way my current role leaves me highly exposed to interruptions and external, urgent demands. I learned to accept that and adapt to it. For this reason, I had to develop my own screening mechanism to give me some measure of control. At times when I am working on projects, it is important that I do not allow interruptions to distract me. To accomplish this, I find it helpful to turn off the phone or instant messaging or find a remote location where I cannot be easily reached. Another way to overcome the bad habit of constant urgency is to ensure the support of a good team or family members.

If you are like me living in a world where interruptions and urgency is a way of life, my advice is to learn to prioritize. Accept the fact that you cannot do everything. Focus on the two or three things that you are really good at and do not feel guilty about the rest.

**Ms. Dale McErlean, Finance Manager**

## Important and Urgent – Identifying the Differences

Three principles that will help you differentiate between the urgent and the important are:

1. **Important and Draining People:** Earlier, we discussed the value of filtering on people. We suggested that in your life you have important people and draining people. In daily activities you will find that the important people are more likely to feed you important matters or

important subjects while draining people are more likely to present you with urgent matters and subjects.

The important people understand your important roles; they are engaged on your stage and are interested in your success. As a result of that commitment they protect your priorities and filter out the distractions that come from unnecessary urgency. On the other hand, the draining people are not as committed to your goals and less likely to appreciate the price you have to pay as you respond to their urgent demand. The draining people are not as involved on your stage of play; they are driven by the demands of different priorities or stages. So as you focus on your important people, you will most likely reduce your exposure to urgent matters that plague our culture today.

2. **Feelings and Thoughts:** The second principle that will help you differentiate between important and urgent is to examine your feelings and thoughts in response to the matter or subjects presented to you. Urgent matters activate your feelings. They cause you to feel anxious or stressed or perplexed. They compel you to act based on your emotions. They may cause you to feel guilty, nervous, and/or frustrated. Important matters activate your mind and call you to think in a rational ways.

When confronted with an urgent matter, do not respond emotionally. Do not make commitments before thinking of the alternatives and the consequences. We recommend that you practice project-like thinking. Ask yourself:

- What is the worst that could happen if this urgency is neglected?
- Is there any real value in what is being presented?
- What commitments need to be delivered?
- What actions need to take place in response to this demand?
- What sacrifices and costs need to be incurred?
- What is the impact this urgent matter has on my important people?

Our suggestion is that when you are presented with a matter or subject that results in negative or stressful feelings, bring it under the control of your mind before making any commitment.

3. **Reactive and Proactive:** Urgent matters often call us to react, and place us under the influence of individuals or conditions outside our control. Important matters call us to be proactive and controlled. **Remember, you cannot start anything without stopping something.** There is very little wisdom in giving up something important in favor of something that is merely urgent. Important matters or subjects fit within a plan that is forward thinking and balanced.

When confronted with urgent matters, take control and negotiate for alternative lower cost options. If you focus on the important subjects of life, you will most often be able to negotiate for the lower priority of most urgent matters. Our message is before you react, evaluate the price you have to pay, should you respond to it.

Making a list of your important subjects will help you respond to what is important and avoid what is urgent. This list will also help you filter the amount of information you receive, collect and store. Interestingly, you will find that this will help you build a filing index and an information store that supports your important roles and goals. This, in turn, will help you enhance your relationships with the important and teachable people who are your information exchange partners. As you filter your subjects, your filing system will become an important resource structured to support your roles, helping you to fulfill your goals and add value to your significant relationships.



Some time ago I read a quote about this wise person who when asked about his life priorities said, “My priorities are God, family, then my job. They are in that order because when the job disappears I want to have something left to fall back on”. The advice I give to an overloaded person is that the job is important but it is not the most important thing in your life. Make your time at work as productive as you can, (work all the time you are at work) but remember to leave and go home for what is more important and what gives you joy and satisfaction there.

**Ms. Karen MacDonald, Regional Director, Quality Improvement and Education**



### **Exercise**

Take a look at your present filing system and ask yourself:

1. What information have you collected that supports your most important roles?
2. How will that information help you develop the qualities in the adjectives that describe that role?
3. How does that information help you to DO the actions required by your most important goals?
4. How will the information you collected enhance your relationships with your important and teachable people?
5. What information have you collected that is redundant or adds no value? Can you discard it? Why not?
6. Using Template D that follows begin listing the subjects that you believe are important to your roles and indicate the related role.
7. You can go the extra mile by summarizing your high value roles, goals and subjects into one handy sheet we call it “Filter at a Glance”. An example of this template is provided later. This handy summary can be laminated and placed in a visible location to guide you as you focus and prioritize your life. Further, this tool can help periodically examine your progress.

**Please note:** If this is the first time you are doing such an exercise, you may find this awkward in the beginning. **Do not let this hold you back. Remember your goal is progress, not perfection.** Later on this will become second nature to you.

## **T**emplate: Subjects Inventory

Main Subject Sub subject Sub / Sub Subject	Related Roles
<i>Ex: Leadership</i>	<i>Speaker, Advisor, Coach</i>
<i>Coaching</i>	<i>Advisor</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>Friend</i>

<sup>i</sup> Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1967), page 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Merrill E. and Donna N. Douglass, *Manage Your Time Your Work Yourself: The Updated Edition* (New York: AMACOM, 1993), page 26.

<sup>iii</sup> Edward R. Dayton and Ted W. Engstrom, *Strategy for Living* (Glendale, California: G/L Publications, 1976), page 67.