

White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload

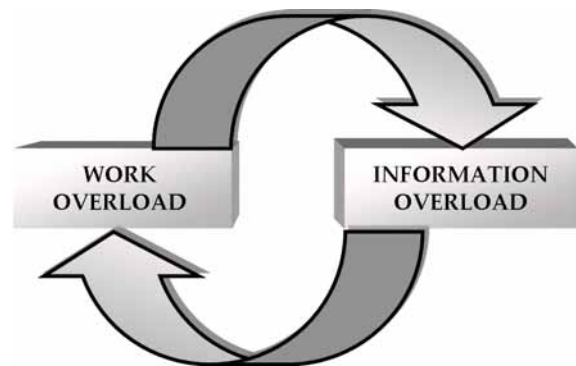


Overcoming Interruptions

Background

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

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.” Please go to <http://www.nomoreoverload.com/request.asp>



[Baha & Margaret Habashy](#)

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image, the deeper it is ingrained in our minds. Each of these exposures consumes mental energy and occupies storage space in our brain.

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."¹ 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

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 the idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge."

¹Timothy: 6:20

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.

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 the Statements 8 to 14 of the [Effectiveness and Overload Gauge](#)

Overcoming Interruptions

Thoughts and Tips are provided to help you improve your effectiveness by batch processing interruptions.

Studies suggest that as much as 30 % of your workday can be wasted due to interruptions.ⁱⁱ Constant interruptions lead to irritability and frustration. As you try to prioritize your daily activities and focus on important roles, goals and activities, interruptions take control of your life and prevent you from doing what you had planned. Interruptions come from a variety of sources and take a variety of forms:

1. **The phone** has become an accepted source of interruption. Its persistent ring seems to give it the right to override all other priorities. Whether you are focusing on an important task or engaged in an important conversation the ring of the phone demands your attention. So what can you do? Forward your calls to your voice mail and batch process your calls based on your reasonable personal communication protocol that you communicate through your outgoing voice message.
2. **E-mail notifier:** Whether by ring or synthesized voice calling “You Got Mail” this most irritating technology can divert your attention and cause you to waste valuable energy. So what can you do? Turn your e-mail notifier off and batch process your e-mail based on your reasonable communication protocol that is compatible with your roles and has the support of your important people.
3. **Instant Messaging:** If you are part of the emerging world order you may be expected to be **always on**. Through instant messaging products like IBM SameTime, Microsoft Instant Messenger, and others, friends and foes have access to your ears and eyes as long as you allow them. So what can you do? Turn off this feature or restrict access to a very select few only when you are prepared to receive interruptions in response to very important situations. Use appropriate filters to control this most invasive technology.
4. **“Do you have a minute?”** This common request that faces a busy manager can be most irritating when it comes repeatedly from the same draining people. Before your inner soul is able to say “No” the visitor has already entered your office and is comfortably seated in your chair. So what can you do? Avoid the draining people. Coach your important and teachable people in batch processing interruptions into well-planned meetings.
5. **Self-induced interruptions:** A self-induced interruption is just as damaging as an interruption that enters your world from outside sources. This is how it plays out. As you are working on something important a thought comes into your mind. You remember something you wish to share with another person. You rush to relieve your mind from the burden of carrying this thought. You pick up the phone, send an e-mail or get up and drop by the unsuspecting other saying, **“I was just thinking...”** This not only destroys your concentration but also inflicts unwanted interruptions on others. What can you do? Learn the art of batch processing interruptions into well-planned meetings.



My advice to the overloaded person is to turn off the electronic alarms in your life - whether it be the sound that notifies you of a new e-mail, or the meeting reminder that buzzes you every ten minutes of a coming meeting, or the persistent ring of a phone when you should not be disturbed. These are distressful distractions that can drive you to despair. Take control over them; turn off what you do not absolutely need.

Ms. Andrea Seymour, Vice President and Chief Information Officer

TIPS: What can you do?

Batch processing interruptions into well-planned meetings:

While being accessible to your team and having an open door should be encouraged, it is important to set reasonable control so you can focus on important tasks. We recommend the habit of using a “VIP Paper”. What is that? It is a simple tool that will help you capture important thoughts and record important tips. Further, it will help you organize your thoughts and set the stage for focused one-on-one meetings with your important and teachable people.

VIP always stood for “Very Important People”. Here we like to call it a “Very Important Paper for a Very Important Person”. The following Template “F” provides an example of a simple sheet to help you capture your thoughts for future discussion with your important and teachable people.

Template – VIP – Thoughts and Tips

Time Date	Prepared For Discussion With: <i>Adam Helpful</i>		Action Requested		Priority
	Name / Subject / Thoughts	Response / Tips	From	Due Date	ABC
6.20	<i>Can you help with budget</i>	<i>Excited about role, will prepare draft</i>		<i>6.27</i>	
	<i>Review accounting skills</i>	<i>Aced High school accounting</i>			
	<i>Discuss holiday plans</i>	<i>No problem</i>			
6.22	<i>Consider CMA course.</i>				
	<i>How is Project skills</i>				
	<i>JS does not seem to agree, why</i>				
6.24	<i>Meet with SJ for review</i>			<i>6.29</i>	

This is how it works. Keep a separate VIP sheet for every one of the important people you communicate with regularly. Place these in a divided ring binder. As you are working or even while you are in some meeting when you remember or receive a valuable thought that you wish

to share or discuss with one of your important others resist the urge of calling them, e-mailing them or going up to see them. Instead, write that thought down in the “Thought” column of the VIP sheet you labeled with this person’s name. Save that thought till the next time you meet.



I lead a large team plus I have other senior leaders that I call my important people. My life is full of activities and demands that are hard to sort and organize. I had to find a tool to ensure that nothing falls through the cracks. Having a VIP binder was the tool I needed.

My VIP binder has a tab for each of my important people. As thoughts or “To Do” items come to mind, I automatically record them in the section relating to the particular person. It also has a section for notes for myself. This provides me with an easy tool for organizing and delegating responsibilities to the appropriate roles among my team. This, by far, has had the greatest impact on my effectiveness.

Mr. Paul Kim, Manager of Finance

One of the great ways to enhance your relationship with the important and teachable people in your life is to have regular, pre-planned, one-on-one meetings with them. Depending on the relationship and the need, such appointments should vary in duration and frequency. It is during such a meeting that all the thoughts you recorded can be brought up and discussed. You can then note the response in the “Tips or Response” column. You see what you have indirectly developed is an agenda for your one-on-one encounter. As you collect these sheets they become a progressive record of the items you discussed, an appropriate reminder for follow-up, and a non-offensive tool for ongoing accountability. Most importantly, you have reduced the interruptions you are causing yourself and others.

Now is your chance to be a coach. You can see that if you train the people who interrupt you frequently to follow the same approach you will also save most of the interruptions they cause in your life. This will save you even more time and energy.

You may be presently using regular notebooks for a similar purpose. This is fine. One key advantage of using the approach described above is that as you keep your sheets in a divided binder you are sorting your thoughts as you go along. You may keep a sheet or section for yourself as well. This would serve as your “one place for all notes”. Periodically, say once a month, take out a section, label it, staple it and put it away for your records.

Please note: there will always be times when things cannot wait. That is fine. Be flexible to respond to reasonable emotional or practical needs. Remember, “Blessed are the flexible, they never get bent out of shape.”



The most important tool that has helped me take control of my urgency driven world is a simple binder in which I record all the important thoughts that cross my mind or the important communications and commitments I make. This binder is organized by

sections reflecting my important people as well as the important details I need to remember. During the day I take time to examine and process what I have entered in my binder. Some items will lead me to block additional time in my calendar when I can work for longer, uninterrupted periods. This has been most helpful to me.

Ms. Dale McErlean, Finance Manager

This system may not work with highly impulsive or draining people. Let us give you an example that happens far too often. A draining person who often interrupts your day comes to your door asking the same question, **“Do you have a minute?”** Before you are able to say no, he or she starts talking. Here is what you should do.

Shortly after the first few sentences ask, **“What would you like to see happen as result of our visit?”** You see, you are politely asking for a clear, visible outcome. You are helping him or her define an agenda for your meeting. A draining person is not likely to have thought so far. By this statement you are helping the draining person think and take some responsibility for the outcome of the meeting. If no agenda was thought of or if he or she says, “I am not sure” ask him or her to return when they have defined one. If the person has thought of a clear outcome suggest that for best results you would be glad to schedule adequate time in the future. In so doing you are coaching the draining person in the value of proactive thinking and planning. You are respectfully allowing them appropriate time based on your controlled calendar.ⁱⁱⁱ



As I examine my work life I find that meetings, e-mail, and interruptions are the three critical factors that lead to overload in my business world. The number of meetings and the amount of time spent on items of low importance to the business have to be better managed. Some managers delegate managing their calendar to an assistant. My time is a valuable asset. It is my responsibility to accept or reject a meeting. This should not be easily delegated to others.

I receive a lot of e-mail and I had to learn to prioritize what deserves my time. I learned to filter out what is not from my very important people and reduce the priority of the flood of “cc” that comes into my inbox. These changes, along with reducing the interruptions that distract my focus, have helped me manage my effectiveness and hopefully, give me more time to spend on activities valued by our customers and our business.

Mr. John Ramdeen, Finance Executive, Global Services

I organized the time I spend with my employees. While my team knows that they can come and see me any time, I have structured regular one on one meetings to discuss work and personal issues. This has reduced the number of interruptions I get and has enhanced my relationships with my staff.



I also learned that I need to block one on one time with myself. For me, life can be quite hectic. I need processing time to “think” without the interruptions and distractions of others around me. The most important advice I can give to an overloaded manager is to block

regular processing time to think. It may be as little as fifteen minutes a day or during a hectic time; however, it proves invaluable in the long run.

Ms. Joelle Perez, Finance Project Leading Manager

Summary

- ✓ Interruptions can waste as much as 30% of your day, frustrate you, and destroy your effectiveness.
- ✓ Interruptions often result as a response to urgent situations and impulses.
- ✓ Most items that cause interruptions can wait for a future time and a future response.
- ✓ Interruptions come via e-mail, phone, computer generated instant messaging tools, and impromptu meetings.
- ✓ Batch process your important thoughts by using regularly scheduled one-on-one encounters with your important and teachable people.
- ✓ Use the VIP sheet to develop thoughts to guide your one-on-one meetings with your important people. This will also serve as a record of follow-up and accountability.
- ✓ Become a coach helping others to follow your lead and example by not interrupting you.

By example and simple questions train the draining people to think before they interrupt

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

ⁱⁱ Patricia Pickett, "Interruptions Reduce Staff Productivity," *ComputerWorld Canada*, 5 September 2003, page 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laura M. Stack, "Dealing with Interruptions from Visitors." <http://www.theproductivitypro.com/newsletters/Number%204%20June%201999.htm> (16 June 2004).