

White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload

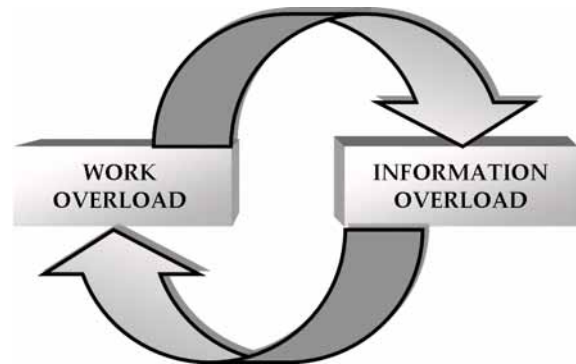


Overcoming Paper Overload

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>



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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 Paper Overload

Thoughts and Tips you will find in the chapter could help you improve your effectiveness by reducing office clutter and paper overload.

The paperless office is a myth that may never happen. Please consider the following statistics:

- One report estimates that paper consumption has increased by 40% in the last 5 years due to the excessive use and misuse of e-mail.ⁱⁱ
- In 1992 Kathryn Alesandrini reported that
 - *“By the year 2000, U.S. businesses will file 120 billion new sheets of paper a year, enough for 5 million filing cabinets.*
 - *Nearly half of all file cabinets house duplicate records.*
 - *The average firm could eliminate one third of their files and transfer another third to inactive storage with no loss of productivity*
 - *Between 75 and 85 percent of filed papers are never referred to again.*
 - *Lost files cost at least \$60 [U.S.] per file to reconstruct.*
 - *Each file cabinet you empty saves \$600 [U.S.] a year.”ⁱⁱⁱ*
- In 2003 Christine Cavanagh wrote that “Experts have tabulated that North American office printers spewed out 1.2 trillion sheets of paper in 2001; an increase of 50 percent since 1996.”^{iv}

Most people feel they need more office and desk space. This is primarily due to having too much paper cluttering their work environment. Paper in your office has a strong visual impact. As your eyes glance at what you have on your desk or on your shelves your attention is diverted from what deserves your focus. Cluttered filing spaces often result in lost documents and/or high maintenance overhead. While you cannot live without paper in your office, you must work very hard at keeping it under control.



In my role and the type of work I do it was easy for me to become an accumulator of paper and documentation. In the taxation world the government has the ability to create and distribute more information and paper than most of us can cope with. The

result is that it became difficult for me to easily find what I needed when I needed it. Some change had to happen. I decided to take control of information overload. Today, my office is clutter free. I am able to prioritize, delegate, and handle documents more promptly. I have very few outstanding issues.

It is interesting how this has impacted my staff. Following my example, they in turn have become more organized. In an organization where document retention and timely access is critical to effectiveness I now seldom hear anyone complaining about not being able to find a document.

As we keep the discipline to prioritize and organize our document handling and processing I believe that our effectiveness will be improved by at least 50%.

Mr. Ross Graham, Manager, Taxation

As a general principle, document originators have the responsibility of maintaining copies of all documents they create. With this in view, you need to always examine the reasons for which you create documents or file documents you receive from others. The following are some tips that have helped many of our clients. Tailor them to your own needs. Apply them to simplify your life and they will give you great benefits.

TIPS: What can you do?

Whether your organization has a document handling and retention policy or not, you are responsible for what you can control.

- A. Develop your own paper handling protocol and communicate it to your important people.** This protocol defines in general terms how and when you will respond to the various types of documents you receive. While there will always be exceptions, exceptions should not dictate and drive your rational processes. If you do not communicate your protocol and gain the support of your important people you will always fall victim to the varied expectations others establish for you. These are often based on their agendas and personal priorities.



EXAMPLE: Here is an example of e-mail or a memo you can send out:

TO: (LIST) Important and teachable people

SUBJECT: Action Requested – My paper handling protocol

Greetings:

It is my desire to improve my effectiveness in handling the flood of paper I receive. Towards this goal I ask for your support as I adhere to the following disciplines:

- *I will handle my paper inbox only once a day at (state time of day).*
- *I will give priority to items sent to me personally from important people like you and I will seek to respond to them within (X) **working days**. ALL other mail and mail where you have copied me will be considered for information purposes and given lower priority.*
- *Further, I will give your document higher priority if you provide a subject line indicating what action you expect from me*
- *To reduce my paper filing requirements I will assume that the originator always keeps a copy. **Therefore, I may not have to keep a copy.***

*Please **DO NOT** place any incoming mail anywhere except in the INBOX.*

Thank you for your support.

- B. Seek support for your new paper handling protocol.** Remember, there will always be conflicting priorities. Items that others may deem important may only be merely urgent. Your important people will help you withstand the pressure of urgency if they understand and support your paper handling protocol.
- C. Batch process your paper mail at a regular time in the day.** Set regular times to review your INBOX. This could be first thing in the morning or maybe midday. If so, block this time in your calendar as an important appointment with yourself. You may call such an appointment a “processing meeting”.
- D. Examine your INBOX by the recycling box.** This encourages you to discard most of your mail before you take it into your office.
- E. Apply the “OHIO” – Only Handle It Once principle.** If you allow enough paper processing time, you can apply the **4 D**’s described below:

1. **Delete (Discard) It Now.** If you have not asked for it or it is not clearly labeled to be from one of your important people, your first question should be why should you even open it. Why not delete it now?
 2. **Deal With It Now.** If the item at hand can be processed in 3 to 5 minutes deal with it now.
 3. **Delegate It Now.** If processing such a document will help one of your teachable people grow, delegate it to him or her. So delegate it now. For example, if you receive a forty-page report or study that may be important, ask one of your teachable people to examine it and provide you with a synopsis or recommendations.
 4. **Diarize It Now.** If the document you just received requires more than 5 minutes of your time make a processing appointment with yourself to deal with it. Be sure to diarize it now.
- F. Keep your INBOX out of sight.** This will help you avoid the temptation for distraction every time someone places an item in your INBOX. This is a wasteful distraction that you can avoid.
- G. Keep a DELETE Box.** This is a box where you place items that you wish to discard but fear the possibility of needing it some time soon. Avoid the temptation to open such items. Instead, place it in the DELETE box so you can retrieve it if the need arises. If the need does not arise within a reasonable period, say a month or tow, discard it permanently.
- H. Keep your OUTBOX handy.** If your OUTBOX is within reach you can place items in it easily and access them any time you are leaving the office or passing by the mailroom.
- I. Unsubscribe from magazines and periodicals.** When you get them, clip what you need, place it in your reading file and discard the rest.



Paper overload has been one of my critical problems. I seemed to be overrun with paper, charts, and reports that built and accumulated on my desk. To improve my effectiveness and cope with the increased demands placed on me I had to take control of this part of my business life. My starting point was to design a filing system that reflects my roles and how I operate. It was important to make sure that the headings on the files are easily understood and make sense to me, reflecting the way I think. Now I have a cabinet that contains my key issues or key items. I also have one drawer that deals with my staffing issues and my relationship with them. During the day I move a lot to different meetings. Now I carry a small binder that holds all the current critical data that I need to refer to often.

Having an organized filing system and keeping my desk clear did not only help me feel in control of my world but has also saved me a lot of time. Now I do not waste too much time looking for what I need. **Mr. Gerry Baranecki, People Manager**

Summary

- ✓ The paperless office is a myth that may never happen.
- ✓ Most documents in our offices are not needed for normal business life.
- ✓ As a general principle, the originator of any document is responsible for maintaining it. Always ask why you should keep a copy.
- ✓ Develop your personal paper handling protocol, communicate it and gain the support of your important people for it.
- ✓ Batch process your mail. Handle it only once applying the 4D's.
- ✓ Keep your INBOX out of sight and your OUTBOX handy.
- ✓ Use a DELETE Box to help you discard items that you are afraid to destroy
- ✓ Unsubscribe from magazines and periodicals. When you get them clip what you need, place it in your reading file and discard the rest.

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

ⁱⁱ "E-Mail Leads Workers To Use 40% More Paper, Study Says," *National Post*, 19 November 2001, section D, page 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathryn Alesandrini, *Survive Information Overload: The 7 Best Ways to Manage Your Workload by Seeing the Big Picture* (Homewood, Illinois: Business One Irwin, 1992) page 71.

^{iv} Christina Cavanagh, *Managing Your E-Mail: Thinking Outside the Inbox*. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2003) page 34.