

Managing Information Overload: Less is More

by Jeff Davidson

Jack Avery (named disguised) lives alone in Pittsburgh near the old site of Three Rivers Stadium, in a small house he bought in the late 1990s. Jack is 37 years old and works for an association. As a computer jock, Jack is wired to the world.

Jack, like the rest of us, is part of a generation deluged with information. He takes particular delight in delving into 450-pages computer software guides. The volume of new knowledge published in every field is enormous and easily exceeds anyone's ability to keep pace (although the Jack Avery's of the world have the personal space and seclusion to make the attempt).

With each Passing Day

More so with each passing day, there is no fixed body of knowledge that everyone can be counted on to know. Except in very specific areas of interest, or if you decide to live alone and wade through computer manuals for entertainment, there is no possibility of keeping pace.

There are choices to make about where you want to focus your energy and attention. Choose to acquire knowledge that supports or interests you, not that you simply happened to ingest, or think you have to ingest.

At all points, there is only one party who controls the volume, rate, and frequency of information to which you're exposed. That person is you. The notion of "keeping up" is illusory, self-defeating, and frustrating. Every evening after you've cleared your desk, acknowledge yourself for what you accomplished that day.

Don't beat yourself up for what you didn't do. If you can do better, you will, maybe not at once, but soon enough. Never let your quest to "stay informed" or "keep up" diminish your family time.

You're Not Alone

If information overload makes you feel overwhelmed and powerless, take heart – you're not alone. Information overload is a sociocultural phenomenon impacting virtually every adult in society. This phenomenon has reached pathological proportions for many individuals.

This disorder is characterized by obsessively checking and rechecking email for new messages, endless web surfing, and constantly getting news updates. It is also characterized by always being available to someone else via chat or email. The desire to stay in constant communication has



mushroomed in importance to the point of interfering with the activities of daily living.

How did we arrive at this? How did humans initially fend for themselves? What was our economic livelihood? How did we survive on this earth? We were hunters and gatherers. Before hunting and gathering came into full swing, and before the bow and arrow were perfected, people were at the mercy of predators.

The next great age of humankind was the age of agriculture. People learned they could plant seeds and grow corn. Before the age of agriculture coalesced, people starved because there wasn't enough corn. Then came the age of industry – production, consumption, capital goods, shipments, and warehousing. Before the age of industry fully arrived, many people caught their fingers in the machines.

Into what age are we embarking? We're in a netherland, which I call "The era of over-information. The age of information is coming, and with it will come different perspectives.

When we're in the information age, we will not have to deal with printouts, posted pads, or instruction manuals. We will not have to deal with everything that's beating down on us now. Timely and relevant Information will be as accessible as flipping a switch.

Learn What "Not to Know"

You need to grasp the information that impacts your career, know how to stay on top of it, and have the strength to leave the rest behind. I'm not suggesting you ignore things willy-nilly, but that you make conscious choices about where to give your time and attention. As surely as this article will come to a conclusion, your life will end – it's time to recognize that most of what competes for your attention needs to be ignored.

Most of this information is media related, but it is not news. Ancient ethnic clashes that have been occurring for thousands of years are not news. Transportation mishaps are not really news.

How do we grasp the information that comes our way, stay on top of it, and have rewarding and productive careers? First realize that you are the only person in charge of the breathing space, freedom, and peace of mind that you will enjoy in life.

Many people make excuses for being overloaded. Someone else is forcing them to receive more magazine subscriptions than they can possibly keep up with, forcing them to put their names on more mailing lists. No one is doing this to you – you are doing it to yourself.

Curiously, the more information we attempt to consume, the more we seek to acquire. We are like information switchboards, marveling at how much we can keep our fingers on. To ensure there's never a dull moment, we open up yet another magazine, rent or download yet another DVD, look at yet another bulletin.

While researching to write my book, *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society*, I found that more information is generated in one hour than you can ingest in the rest of your life. More than previous generations, we must have the strength to say “no.”

Avoiding Information Overload

The temporary satisfaction that you might feel for getting through the day's glut of information is tempered by the reality that if you picked up yet another magazine or book, or visited another URL, listened to another addition of “All Things Considered” on National Public Radio, you would have still more to add to what you already processed for the day.

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For surviving information overload and ultimately thriving in the face of it, I'm advocating that you can take in even less information than you're currently attempting, and fare far better. Decide where you will give your time and attention. Carefully choose what to focus on and you increase the chances of mastering that domain, which enables you to add to your store house of knowledge, thus leading to wisdom.

If you're concerned that you'll miss some vital piece of information, fear not. The redundancy in our information channels, be they publications, the Internet, key magazines, etc, increases the probability that you won't miss some major development that merits your attention. If you use email effectively, you can quickly establish a peer group of cyber associates that trade and share information with one and another on a regular, if not ad-hoc, basis.

Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, aka “The Work-life Balance expert”® offers keynote presentations and workshops on a creating work life balance, managing the pace with grace, and thriving in a hyper-accelerated world. Jeff is the leading personal brand in speaking, writing, and reflecting on work-life balance issues, and he has a passion for speaking to organizations who want to help their employees make rapid progress in this arena. He has spoken to Fortune 50 companies such as IBM, Cardinal Health Group, and Lockheed, and to American Express, America Online, Wells Fargo, and Westinghouse.

