
Special Report

The 8 Critical Impacts of Information & E-mail Overload



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Dear reader,

One of the biggest issues facing organisations and their staff in 2009 will be the increasing complaints about ‘loss of productivity’, ‘being overwhelmed’, feeling ‘stressed’ and even staff ‘burnout’ as a result of information and e-mail ‘overload’. Predictions are that this will be the workplace ‘Problem of the Year’ in 2009.

As an Intel research report states, “The combination of e-mail overload and interruptions are widely recognised as a major disrupter of employee productivity and quality of life, yet few organisations take serious action against it”.

Almost every organisation employing knowledge workers has been greatly impacted by Information Overload, defined as the mental state of continuous stress and distraction caused by incessant interruptions and the sheer volume of e-mail and other messages.

The Intel report continues “this phenomenon places workers and managers in a chronic state of mental overload. It has a severe but much underestimated impact on employee productivity and work life balance, while organisations incur the ‘hidden’ cost of extensive financial loss. “

The impact is so severe that addressing this issue should be a high priority. Not only will solving this problem have a positive and immediate impact on individual productivity, performance, and morale, it will also help those organisations who take prompt to gain a significant competitive advantage.

This special report provides compelling information and statistics to show that taking action should be a high priority. Our aim is to provide decision-makers with the background data and a motivation to persuade their organisations to take such action.

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What is Information Overload?

Information overload can be defined as the state of having more information available that one can readily assimilate (i.e.: when it is difficult to absorb the information into your existing base of knowledge).

The New York-based research company Bases defines it this way; “Information overload describes the excess of information that results in the loss of ability to make decisions, process information and prioritise tasks.”

It is a symptom of our ‘high-tech’ age and comes from such sources as TV, radio, internet, newspapers and magazines as well as wanted and unwanted phone calls, instant messages, social network messages, text/SMS messages, faxes, web searches and e-mails.

Information overload can also be referred to as Info-stress, Techno-stress, Data Smog, Infomania, Info-fatigue and

Information overload was a term coined by American sociologist and futurologist Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book Future Shock. Toffler argued that society is undergoing an enormous structural change, a revolution from an industrial society to a "super-industrial society". He asserts that this change will overwhelm people, the accelerated rate of technological and social change leaving them disconnected and suffering from "shattering stress and disorientation"; what he termed ‘future shocked’.

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His definition of Future Shock can be summed up as “too much change in too short a period of time” and in a discussion of the components of such shock, he also used the term “information overload”.

Nowadays, e-mail is a major source of information overload, as people struggle to keep up with the rate of incoming messages. The problem lies in that email is either responded to immediately, or is ignored for days at a time.



The History of Information Overload

Information overload is not a new concept, believe it or not. Since the twelfth century and especially since the advent of the Gutenberg printing press, people have been complaining about the wide range of information they had to consume in order to contribute to society.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an intellectual revolution occurred as books and written information became more widely produced and disseminated, while innovations and new relationships in economics and the sciences emerged. It is thought that this first revolution of the mind triggered, in kind, the first phase of systemic societal information overload.

In 1685 the French scholar Adrien Baillet lamented, 'We have reason to fear that the multitude of books which grows every day in a prodigious fashion will make the following centuries fall into a state as barbarous as that of the centuries that followed the fall of the Roman Empire.'

In the latter part of the twentieth century this concept of information overload has resurfaced with the advent of the digital revolution. This has allowed ever more information to be available to more and more people. For example, a Sunday edition of the *New York Times* carries more information in it than the average 19th-century citizen accessed in his entire life.

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Personal computers allow each of us to generate an incredible amount of data. The ubiquitousness of the internet allows us to share that information with each other (e-mails, videos, photos, documents etc.), with virtually no limitations. Mobile phones have become integrated with portable computing into the new smart phones, allowing us tremendous portability, so we are able to connect with each other anywhere, anytime.



The Effects of Information Overload

As the amount of information flowing into our lives has increased exponentially, we find ourselves stressed from the distraction, interruption and pressure which this relentless flow of information places on us.

Here are 7 ways that information overload has a negative effect on us;

1: Interruptions/Distractions

Today's rapid flow and exchange of information, and the resulting tasks they generate, are overwhelming for most employees and their managers. This relentless barrage of communication exacts a toll on their productivity, as well as on their personal well-being.

One of the key reasons that information overload has such a strong negative impact is that it so often comes to us as an interruption to a task or activity, especially now that there is such a wide range of technologies that can deliver this information to us anywhere, at any time.

According to a Northeast Human Resources Association survey in August in America, the biggest source of worker distraction is e-mail, followed by interruptions from co-workers and PDAs (personal digital assistants) such as the BlackBerry.

most knowledge workers lose 28% or 2.1 hours a day of their productivity to constant interruptions and recovery time

Experts say that distractions like checking e-mails, searching the Web, sending instant messages, and taking cell phone calls at work are disrupting the workplace as never before.

In "The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity," Basex, a New York-based researcher, noted that most knowledge workers lose 28% of their productivity due to interruptions like this. The Basex study reckons that U.S. businesses lost \$650 billion in 2007. This is based on average earnings of \$23 an hour for 56 million knowledge workers.

Intel's white paper on Infomania claims that 'on average, knowledge workers can expect three minutes of uninterrupted work on any task before being interrupted. Sources of interruption include e-mail, instant messages,



phone calls, text messages, co-workers, and other distractions. The majority of these distractions are attended to immediately.’

It goes on to state that ‘the result is that people average 11 minutes on any one “working sphere” (project) before switching to another project altogether. This extreme fragmentation of work results in a severe cumulative time loss, with some estimates as high as 25 percent of the workday. In addition, the inability to concentrate on an intellectual activity requiring more than a few minutes has a debilitating effect on employees’ ability to achieve optimal results.’

In a Basex survey, 94% of knowledge workers said they would respond instantly when a manager assigned them an urgent task. About 90% would answer a subordinate's or colleague's question. But alarmingly, 62% stop work to address a friend's non-business-related request.

In his online journal, “Dealing with Information Overload,” Paul Chin said that this “rampant multitasking and deluge of available information have produced a counterproductive culture and created a paradox: the more we try to do, the less we get done; and the more inundated we are with information, the less time we spend absorbing it.”

most workers can expect only three minutes of uninterrupted work on any task before being interrupted!

These work-interrupting distractions cause a direct loss of time due to “cognitive reorientation costs” or “switching costs” compared to uninterrupted work (see more details about this under the heading ‘Multi-tasking’). This is time required to change context from one task to another and back. The actual time consumed by the interruption or distraction can be minimal and yet still impose a serious loss: an irrelevant pop-up lingering for a few seconds or a brief phone call can take minutes to recover lost concentration.

The old adage that time is money has changed. We find now that time is a more precious commodity than money. Overwhelmed workers are steadily squandering a significant fraction of their time on dealing with information overload that arrives as an interruption or distraction.

Considering the impact that interruptions have on an organisation, it is surprising that managers are not more concerned. Every single day in the workplace, staff are diverted their attention away from high priority work to interruptions and other distractions, with a significant negative impact on their productivity and effectiveness.



2: Loss of Focus

Business interruptions come in two types: external disruptions from phone, e-mail or by colleagues, and internal interruptions from mental distractions or self-dialogue. Some of these interruptions, of course, are part of doing business, particularly in these days when companies are encouraging teamwork and collaboration, but often they are personal and non-business related.

What is often under-estimated is the amount of time it takes to recover from such interruptions. A Basex report shows that ‘most knowledge workers lose about 2.1 hours a day to constant interruptions *and recovery time*’. “A 30-second interruption can take a worker 10 minutes to get back into the flow of work,” notes Jonathan B. Spira, CEO and chief analyst at Basex.

As a result, many knowledge workers have a tough time prioritising tasks and setting boundaries. If a superior asks for urgent assistance on a multi-million dollar deal, interrupting one's workflow makes sense, but if a colleague comes by to chat about a movie when you're working to a deadline, cutting the conversation short makes more sense if you want to be effective.

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Ironically, the companies most active in providing the technology by which we are interrupted and distracted – Microsoft, Google, IBM, Intel – are trying to do something about this. In June 2008 a group of interested researchers from this diverse set of corporations, plus smaller companies, academic institutions, and consultancies, created the Information Overload Research Group ([IORG](#)), a non-profit interest group dedicated to raising awareness, sharing research results and promoting the creation of solutions around Information Overload.

Their inaugural Conference was held on July 15, 2008 in New York City at which they agreed to work together to understand, publicise and solve the information overload problem. They plan to do this by (1) defining and building awareness of information overload, (2) facilitating and funding collaboration and advanced research aimed at shaping solutions and establishing best practices, and (3) serving as a resource centre to share information and resources, offer guidance and connections, and help make the business case for fighting information overload.



3: Multi-tasking

Having so much information available to us and much of it arriving unbidden as interruptions, we now work in a constant state of multi- tasking.

The current business environment invites distractions, explained Maggie Jackson, author of "Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age." She writes that "Knowledge workers are overloaded because they often work in a noisy, cluttered, harried environment and because they are fragmenting their attention all day long," she said. "Finding time for deep focus is nearly impossible when you're bouncing from task to task while instant messaging".

In the twenty-first century, we take it for granted that our lives will be constantly interrupted by e-mails, instant messages, and mobile phone calls. But new research is showing that the fast-paced, multitasking lifestyle may actually be hampering workers' productivity rather than enhancing it.

The *New York Times* has an interesting article highlighting some of this research. "Multitasking is going to slow you down, increasing the chances of mistakes," David E. Meyer, a cognitive scientist and director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan said in an interview with the *New York Times*.

workers at Microsoft took an average of 15 minutes to return to the task they were working on after being interrupted by a phone call, e-mail, or instant message.

The *NYT* then showed confirmation of these findings by Microsoft research scientist Eric Horvitz, who found that workers at the software company took an average of 15 minutes to return to the task they were working on after being interrupted by a phone call, e-mail, or instant message. "I was surprised by how easily people were distracted and how long it took them to get back to the task," Horvitz said.

The problem lies in thinking that human brains work in a similar fashion to a computer. On any typical PC, the operating system can quickly jump back and forth between running tasks by saving any important task information; something modern processors can do in mere nanoseconds.



The human brain, however, does not context-switch in the same way. We keep an inordinately large amount of information in our heads at one time, but not all of it is quickly accessible. The more complicated the task being performed, the more information has been moved into immediate storage, but this requires an intense concentration that can be easily broken.

Multitasking can give us the illusion that we are very productive and smart. But since we can truly only focus on one thing at a time, multitasking forces us to do extra processing due to the cost of ‘context switching’ (the time it takes to switch our minds when we move from one task to another).

Author Maggie Jackson warns that the cumulative effect of new technologies is that we may be losing our ability to maintain attention more generally. Attention requires focus, awareness and what she calls executive attention.

"Relying on multitasking as a way of life, we chop up our opportunities and abilities to make big- picture sense of the world and pursue our long- term goals," she writes. "The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention – the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress."

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Ms. Jackson concludes that "as we plunge into a new world of infinitely connectible and accessible information, we risk losing our means and ability to go beneath the surface, to think deeply."

Bill McKibben, the great environmentalist said “I feel that much of my life is ebbing away in the tide of minute-by-minute distraction . . . I’m not certain what the effect on the world will be. But psychologists do say that intense close engagement with things does provide the most human satisfaction.”

McKibben describes himself as “loving novelty” and yet “craving depth”, which is the contemporary predicament in a nutshell.



4: Poor Decision-making

One of the impacts of information overload is to reduce the mental capacity of knowledge workers. This phenomenon is also known as Attention Deficit Trait (ADT), informal term coined by the psychiatrist Dr. Edward Hallowell.

He asserts that the cognitive impact of Infomania causes people to work well below their full potential; they produce less output, think superficially, and generate fewer new ideas – despite working an increasing number of hours. There is also evidence from other studies showing an increase in error rates, including errors in management decision-making.

Other research shows that interruptions and distractions can cause a loss of “situational awareness”, requiring cognitive reorientation to restore task situational awareness after the interrupting event. This can also induce errors, rework, forgotten steps, and lowered overall output.

Information overload causes superficial analysis, delayed decisions, black & white thinking, and increased mistakes

In summary, information overload causes poor decision-making as we:

- become highly selective and ignore a large amount of information or give up and don't go beyond the first results in many cases
- need more time to reach a decision
- make mistakes
- have difficulties in identifying the relationship between the details and the overall context (black & white thinking – no shades of grey)

5: Lack of ‘Think’ time

One of the by-products of information overload is the lack of ‘quiet’ time available for planning, reflecting or being creative. We are now less capable of thinking, generating creative ideas, and effectively solving problems.



The creative thinking process requires long stretches of uninterrupted time, to study books, articles and online resources, and to process information, sorting it mentally and generating insight. These activities not only take time, but also require deep mental concentration, which builds up slowly and can easily be lost.

Research demonstrates that restoring daily segments of continuous “Quiet Time” can have a major effect of increasing productivity in development teams. Additional research shows a correlation between a fragmented work mode and reduced creativity.

As Intel’s white paper puts it, ‘In the past, such “thinking time” was core to the work paradigm. Newton got hit by that apple because he was sitting under a tree’. Sitting and contemplating the world (what we now call “doing nothing”) was an integral and important part of a workplace role.

It seems that our technology channels our thinking towards multiple, mostly trivial problems instead of focusing on a few important ones where we can create real value

It seems that we’re accessible at all hours round the clock to beeping, alerting, attention–grabbing devices and software tools and that we’re expected to respond to them instantly. It seems that our technology channels our thinking towards multiple, mostly trivial problems instead of focusing on a few important ones where we can create real value.

This reduced ability to reflect on problems on a regular basis and in large blocks of time exacerbates the reduction in mental capacity described previously.

In an article in The Atlantic magazine, Nicholas Carr asks: “Is Google making us stupid?” Carr, a chronic distractee like the rest of us, noticed that he was finding it increasingly difficult to immerse himself in a book or a long article – “The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.”

Instead, he now Googles his way through life, scanning and skimming but not pausing to think or absorb information. He feels himself being hollowed out by “the replacement of complex inner density with a new kind of self – evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available”.



6: Organisational Dysfunction

Looking beyond the impact on individuals, one can also see the ‘knock on’ effect that information overload has on the many aspects of an organisation and some of its more critical processes.

Manager – staff interactions

An important role of managers is to lead, guide, support and coach/mentor their team members. However, many staff complain about being unable to get any or enough time to communicate with their manager.

Managers often waste innumerable hours dealing with e-mail and other information inputs but don’t find time to respond to a subordinate’s message or request for days. The fact that a subordinate is unable to get a manager’s advice, support or coaching in a timely manner is an alarming sign of how widespread the impact of ‘overload’ has broken down even the most basic of management processes.

And then, even when an employee and manager do get together for a “one-on-one” interaction, much of that time will be lost as the manager deals with interruptions via phone, e-mail, or other staff.

89% of people consider colleagues who answer phone or e-mail messages in a meeting to be extremely rude

Meetings

Dealing with incoming phone calls and e-mail during a meeting is now regarded as ‘normal’, despite the fact that a Hewlett Packard study shows that 89% of people consider colleagues who answer such messages are extremely rude. The reason it still occurs may be due to the fact that 30% of people believe it is not only acceptable to do this, but that they are actually being diligent and efficient in doing so!

One of the key aspects of an effective meeting is combining the creative and critical thinking of several stakeholders to discuss, brainstorm and problem-solve important business issues. This combined energy becomes dissipated when one or members are distracted by external communications. Organisations hold hundreds of meetings every month – a huge investment that is significantly wasted by information overload and the interruptive way it is able to reach us anywhere, at any time.



Workload Management

A major use of e-mail is to assign and delegate workload. The sender makes a request: fill a Web survey, attend a meeting, compile and share materials, write a report, check a file etc.

The shorter tasks (10 minutes or less) are often attended to as the message is read. This distraction away from prior, usually higher priority tasks, which were being worked on can accumulate rapidly. The longer tasks are added to the recipient's work plan for coming days.

The critical point is that employees spend a significant amount of their working hours in undertaking tasks dictated to them by others, irrespective of their own priorities and often without being able to negotiate a shift in their priorities.

Prior to e-mail, people planned their day based on their individual workload and objectives. If anyone wanted their time, it would have to be negotiated (either with the employee themselves or with their manager). These days, many of the impromptu tasks and unrealistic deadlines are received from the manager himself!

e-mail overload has changed many workplaces from being plan-driven to interruption-driven

However, the fast-paced, interruptive nature of information and e-mail overload means that whole workplaces have gone from being proactive and plan-driven to reactive and interrupt-driven.

Effective Communication

E-mail has become a vital communication tool and the default means of communication for most workers, but its value has been compromised by overload. Almost everything that transpires in an organisation will have gone through an in-box at some stage.

As a result, any bottleneck at this point has repercussions throughout an organisation. A decade ago, e-mail guaranteed a next-day-response. Today, because of the huge volumes being communicated, it is a game of chance: will my urgent message be answered today? Tomorrow? Next week? Ever?



Effective communication via e--mail cannot be guaranteed. Any lack of response breeds ambiguity, since it is unknown whether the message was deliberately ignored, not yet opened, filtered away by some rule, left for a later response, or simply remains unnoticed amongst a plethora of other messages in the in-box.

This results in a broken chain of communication as tasks and projects are put on hold awaiting decisions or information. Understanding and trust between colleagues erodes, and teams already challenged by the limitations imposed by their geographical dispersion are particularly stymied by these breakdowns.

The alternative chosen by many is to become highly reactive to e-mail and little else of real value gets done. We stay back late or come in early just to ‘catch up’ with e-mail, and especially so for those who work with colleagues across the country or around the world the world in different time zones.

*Chronic, long-term
distraction is as
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cigarette smoking*

7: Mental Health & Wellbeing

Keeping up with all the new inputs we receive from a wide range of technological devices takes up a lot of our time each day. This occurs not only at work but also during our personal time; we’re communicating ourselves into a frenzy. And it’s affecting our health in the following ways.

Stress

Stress is a key issue in the workplace, bearing several negative outcomes, with Information Overload being a significant contributor. An unexpected research finding comes from a survey of U.K. employees where *temporary* employees report better well-being, general health, more positive attitude towards work and better work behaviour (e.g., less absenteeism) than their permanent counterparts.

Researchers link this to the finding that many permanent workers reported high levels of work overload, relatively high levels of irritation, anxiety and depression and a strong interference of work with life at home.

Another study shows that 35% of knowledge workers experience back pain, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, eye strain, headaches and stress.



Chronic distraction

David Meyer is professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. In 1995 his son was killed by a distracted driver who ran a red light. Meyer's specialty was attention: how we focus on one thing rather than another. Attention comes naturally to us; attending to what matters is how we survive and define ourselves.

The opposite of attention is distraction, an unnatural condition and one that, as Meyer discovered in 1995, kills. Now he is convinced that chronic, long-term distraction is as dangerous as cigarette smoking. In particular, there is the great myth of multitasking. No human being, he says, can effectively write an e-mail and speak on the telephone. Both activities use language and the language channel in the brain can't cope. Multi-taskers fool themselves by rapidly switching attention and, as a result, their output deteriorates.

The same thing happens if you talk on a mobile phone while driving – even legally with a hands-free kit. You listen to language on the phone and lose the ability to take in the language of road signs. Worst of all is if your caller describes something visual, a wallpaper pattern, a picture.

Pseudo ADD is when you simply cannot focus on a task without compulsively checking e-mail, voicemail or the 'net

As you imagine this, your visual channel gets clogged, and you start losing your sense of the road ahead. Distraction can kill either you or others (or both).

Chronic distraction, from which we all now suffer, kills you more slowly. Meyer says there is evidence that people in chronically distracted jobs are, in early middle age, appearing with the same symptoms of burn-out as air traffic controllers. They might have stress-related diseases, even irreversible brain damage. But the damage is not caused by overwork, it's caused by multiple distracted work.

Attention Deficit Disorder

There's a term for what we're becoming due to this bombardment of information: "pseudo ADD." This term was coined by two Harvard psychology professors who noticed that many people are experiencing a shortened attention span because of advances in communication. Those affected do not have what is considered clinical Attention Deficit Disorder.



they simply cannot focus on a task without compulsively checking their e-mail, voice mail and/or surfing the Internet

In fact, a sustained negative neurological effect of information overload has been identified by psychiatrist E.M. Hallowell. He has called this effect Attention Deficit Trait, or ADT. 'It isn't an illness; it's purely a response to the hyperkinetic environment in which we live....

When a manager is desperately trying to deal with more input than he possibly can, the brain and body get locked into a reverberating circuit while the brain's frontal lobes lose their sophistication, as if vinegar were added to wine.

The result is black-and-white thinking; perspective and shades of gray disappear. People with ADT have difficulty staying organised, setting priorities, and managing time, and they feel a constant low level of panic and guilt. It seems that being connected all the time will lead us to a major 'disconnect'!

Lowered IQ

It seems workers are literally addicted to checking email and text messages during meetings, in the evening and at weekends. The advent of highly mobile technology offers massive productivity benefits when used responsibly, but inappropriate use can be negative for not just productivity but also for our IQ.

The findings of a recent scientific experiment reveal that those who “over juggle” and who constantly disrupt meetings and important tasks to read and respond to messages, significantly reduce their IQ.

*Constant distractions
reduce IQ by more than
twice as much as
smoking marijuana!*

In a series of tests carried out by Dr Glenn Wilson, Reader in Personality at the Institute of Psychiatry, University of London, an average worker's functioning IQ falls ten points when distracted by ringing telephones and incoming emails.

This drop in IQ is more than double the four-point drop seen following studies on the impact of smoking marijuana. Similarly, research on sleep deprivation suggests that an IQ drop of ten points is equal to missing an entire night of sleep.



8: Quality of life

There was a time when there was a distinct separation between work and home. Now employees bring family problems to work vice versa. As Intel's white paper concludes, information and e-mail overload affects employees' lives (and their loved ones) both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Quantitatively, because employees have less of a "life" when they process incoming messages around the clock. Long evening and weekend sessions at the Inbox have become the norm, appropriating time that used to belong to family, friends, and relaxation.

Increasingly, people take laptops on vacation, not for leisure but to process work-related e-mail

Qualitatively, because when employees are run ragged by the endless pressure of a losing race, their ability to relax and devote time to their life, hobbies, and families is reduced. Long hours might be justified if they felt the pride and joy of a job well done, but even this is denied them as they slip ever backward in their race against the continuing flood of communication.

The other factor is technology (cell phones, laptops, e-mail, text messaging) that provides a continuous cascade of information, both important and trivial. Thanks to this technology, it's possible to bring work home, staying connected to the office on weekends and even during vacations. For some people, that's due to a sense that they're indispensable, and the work couldn't possibly get done without them.

Others might be worried about their jobs if they're out of the loop for an extended period. For many, a holiday is no longer a chance to "get away from it all". Increasingly, people take laptops on vacation, not for leisure but to process work-related e-mail.

Constant access to information, communication, and technology has become such a big issue, experts say, that its implications go beyond a lack of productivity and focus at work. E-mail and information overload also eats into the quality of relationships both at school and at home.

"Attention is the bedrock to learning, memory, social connection, and happiness," Jackson says. And yet, at many schools and businesses, a culture is developing that rewards immediacy over focus, so that attending to what's new at any given moment takes precedence over long-term goals.



Solutions for Information Overload

"In the period ahead of us, more important than advances in computer design will be the advances we can make in our understanding of human information processing - of thinking, problem solving, and decision making..."

Herbert Simon, Economics Nobel-prize winner

The impact of Information & E-mail Overload clearly deserves serious attention and a concerted effort at implementing a solution. No organisation can afford to tolerate a phenomenon that reduces employee productivity, reduces worker health and morale, and costs many thousands of dollars each year.

Technology is perhaps at the root of the advent of information overload, and while it will also be part of the solution, technologies for managing information are often the problem, not the solution. It is people who are the ultimate processors of information, and people are the only ones who can effectively integrate and synthesise what they know to make effective management decisions in the light of their business environment.

So, what can managers and directors do to improve the way we deal with a world of massive information input, and turn their ability to do so into a core competency and a source of competitive advantage?

Technologies for managing information are often the cause of the problem, not the solutions

Development of solutions to address and solve the problem will not be simple. This is especially true given its deeply entrenched nature and numerous misperceptions of impacted knowledge workers. For example, they inevitably claim they can “multi-task” without negative impact on their performance, despite extensive data to the contrary.

A solution will require changes at the heart of expected behaviours and cultural paradigms in the organisation, and possible modification of mission-critical technologies. Any program to achieve results will likely run initially for a year or more. It will involve professionals in the relevant disciplines from within the organisation and beyond. Input from other corporations and support from research and consulting communities will be invaluable to avoid pitfalls and optimise solution elements.



Here's what some organisations around the world are doing to combat the impact of information and e-mail overload.

- IBM Think Fridays encourage staff to take time to think and collaborate with colleagues with less time/emphasis on e-mail etc.
- Intel established a policy of no-e-mail Fridays. This resulted in greater collaboration and meetings.
- Dow Corning implemented a strategy of no meeting weeks once a quarter
- The Nielsen Company fed up with the deluge of irrelevant email messages and the waste of time they cause, has finally come up with an adequate solution to cluttered e-mail inboxes and inefficiency in office environments by removing the reply-to-all button from the computers of their 35,000 employees worldwide.

Suggested Solutions/Actions

From our work with a wide range of organisations in government and non-government sectors, two of the key initial solutions that can be implemented to this intractable problem are as follows:

1. Eliminate e-mail as an interruption

E-mail is not an appropriate tool for urgent communications. These should be made by phone, IM or face-to-face contact instead of (or along with) an e-mail. As a result, you can turn off all the e-mail alerts (visual and audible) on your computer. Alternatively, you can change frequency of the send/receive function on your computer.

The next step is to schedule specific times each day to check the inbox, rather than be interrupted by every new incoming message. Best practice suggests that 4 times a day (to a max. of 45 min each time) will allow you to process all your e-mail each day.

2. Keep the In-box Empty

The whole intent of visiting the inbox should be to process new messages, making decisions about the next actions they require, replying immediately if appropriate, scheduling replies or tasks for another time etc.

By implementing a procedure for handling each e-mail in the in-box only once, processing them the first time they are viewed, you'll process all messages and finish with an empty inbox. This eliminates an enormous amount of multiple reading of messages, indecision, tardy responses and speeds up business and communication processes.



Profile of Stuart Snooks



Stuart Snooks is a Productivity expert who works with busy professionals who are struggling to keep up with all their e-mail and improve their workplace productivity and effectiveness.

He delivers insightful, entertaining and educational solutions that make a real difference to personal and organisational productivity, helping clients to make the mental and behaviour changes needed to be more effective in the way they manage e-mail as part of their workload.

Stuart is keenly aware that people are ‘time poor’ and learn best from well-paced, humorous and highly practical presentations where they are fully involved, engaged and enjoying the process.

With over a decade of ‘hands on experience’ working with those crying out for a practical and affordable solution to the various challenges of workplace productivity, Stuart has developed a series of presentations and workshops that teach highly practical and easily implemented Best Practice skills, techniques and strategies.

Participants learn strategies that help them to:

- ✓ better manage e-mail interruptions
- ✓ get their in-box empty and keep it that way
- ✓ identify and harness their peak energy time to ‘get more done’
- ✓ convert e-mails into tasks and integrate these into the calendar/schedule
- ✓ feel a lot more in control of their workload
- ✓ be more plan-driven (proactive) rather than interruption-driven (reactive)

“The program highlighted how poorly my day was managed and how email managed my time. The workshop showed me how to regain control of my day and operate more efficiently”.

Sab Ambrosino, National Merchandise Manager, Symbion Health

Stuart’s solutions can be delivered by way of training workshops, conference presentations, one-on-one or group coaching, consulting services or a range of products and resources (see next page). He has delivered solutions to clients such as Catholic Church Insurances; CPA Australia; Dental Health Services; Dept of Defence; Dept of Human Services; Dept of Sustainability & Environment; Heinz; Daimler Chrysler; IBM Global Services; Nestle; Motorola; Campaspe, Cardinia, Monash, Hepburn, Whitehorse & Yarra Shire Councils; Simplot; Symbion Health; William Adams (Caterpillar); Wittner Shoes.