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Coping with Information Overload

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We are Microsoft.
Resistance is futile.
You will be assimilated.

— Internet Grafitti

An early visitor to a Ford Motor Company factory found himself standing next to the great man himself, Henry Ford. Ford pointed to a completed automobile and announced: "There are exactly 4,719 parts in that car." The visitor was greatly impressed and wanted to confirm the data with one of Ford's engineers. "I have no idea," replied the engineer when asked. "And I can't think of a more useless piece of information."

The heart of this article is: How can we help our customers deal better with the glut of information they currently face? Can we teach our course participants how to organize both their paper desk tops and their computer desk tops better so they can cope more effectively with information in a timely, less stressful manner? And will more and more people who are using electronic software organizers "downtech" to paper Time Managers?

One thing we know for certain is that information is not the same thing as knowledge. Information, whether on electronic or paper media, can overwhelm us and affect our ability to sleep well at night and to make reasonable, appropriate decisions. Information, as David Shenk suggests, is only as valuable as it is useful. And it is only as useful as it is organized and accessible. If you can't find it, it might as well not even exist. And if it takes you hours each week to locate it, you are paying a very high and stressful price for information.

People seem to be developing a form of Attention Deficit Disorder without inheriting it. The information explosion has something to do with it – all the faxes and e-mail and calls come in, and people can't keep up with it.

— Dr. Theodore Gross

Information Overload

We are beset with more information today than ever before, but how useful is it to us, and what impact does it have on us? Some people call it information overload, which is defined in Television for the 21st Century: The Next Wave (Charles M. Firestone, editor), as "the pathological imbalance between the amount of information provided and that which any sane individual could possibly process."

The symptoms of information overload are typical stress signals: irritability, inability to sleep, exhaustion, and feelings of helplessness. Dr. David Lewis, British psychologist, author and lecturer calls it, "information fatigue syndrome."

Knowledge is power, but information is not. It's like the detritus that a gold-panner needs to sift through in order to find the nuggets. Having too much information can be as dangerous as having too little. Among other problems, it can lead to a paralysis of analysis, making it far harder to find the right solutions or make the best decisions.

Technological tools are never neutral. They are power. And power is never neutral

— Jeremy Rifkin, Social Critic

A Reuters survey of 1,300 British, American, Singapore, Hong Kong and Australian business people, revealed that two-thirds say their personal relationships have been damaged because of information overload. The survey respondents experience more tension at work with their colleagues and feel less satisfied with their jobs because of information overload. Forty percent feel important decisions get delayed and the ability to make good decisions is hampered by too much information. Nonetheless, two-thirds of the respondents said **they wanted even more information.**

We get aroused by all this information, making it harder to think clearly or act sensibly, argues Dr. David Lewis. This can make it difficult for people in critical situations to make sensible decisions, because they are always in panic mode. Even when not in critical situations, decisions are increasingly difficult to make. Christiane Nestroy, construction industry analyst at Bayerische Vereinsbank in Munich, reports, "An analyst receives thousands of pages of reports and financial data (so that) at any moment, a new piece of information could emerge that will change everything." This leads to "...feeling more anxious about making decisions and frightened of the outcome."

Information comes at us in the form of faxes, e-mail, "snail mail", pagers, voice mail, telexes, mobile phones and now the gigantic elephant of information, the world wide web. Everyone and everything is attempting to gain our attention. Most information gets exaggerated just to catch our notice in this sea of data.

The Statistics of Overload

It's really quite an overwhelming problem, and it's getting worse. Few people have figured out how to cope with the 1990's greatest challenge: information overload.

— Andrew Garvin, President Find/SVP, Inc.

Despite its drawback, it is easy to get addicted to this exaggeration and volume of information coming at us from every direction. Years ago, futurists predicted that we would one day work in paperless offices. Clearly, we are accessing more information electronically. But has this reduced the amount of paper we consume? Or, perhaps even more importantly, has more electronic information meant better, more useful information? Consider some of the following statistics:

- While people were predicting that modern business would move to paperless offices, U.S. paper shipments were up fifty percent in the past thirty years, according to the American Forest and Paper Association.

- Hewlett-Packard, the computer giant, makes the bulk of its revenues from its printing divisions. In fact, Hewlett-Packard is now producing and selling paper! This is an unheralded but significant event. An HP spokesperson with the Laser Jet Solutions Group says that HP research suggests that people don't consider reports or letters personal until they have a copy in their hands. The public believes that information on a computer belongs to everyone. Small wonder that so many people print out their e-mail messages.

- In 1850, four percent of American workers handled information for a living. Now most do. Information processing accounts for half of the U.S.'s GNP.

- Aetna, the big health, life, property and casualty insurance company, turned hundreds of their underwriting manuals into electronic files and eliminated 87,000,000 pages of paper. Nonetheless, Aetna processes 100 million health claims a year, of which 80% are submitted on paper. And in one year, Aetna pumped out 1 billion pages of printed reports that were computer generated.

With so many of these (distracted) people running around, we could be becoming the first society with Attention Deficit Disorder.

—Evan I. Schwartz, Wired magazine

It is estimated that each original has 19 copies of it made.

- About 2 trillion pieces of paper are generated yearly in American offices. (Sorry, this stats is pretty exclusively American. Please don't let this stop you from finding equivalent ones for your market.)
- Each American office worker produces about 45 sheets of paper per day.
- The average person spends 60% of his or her time at the office processing documents.
- The typical business manager reads or scans 1 million words per week.
- U.S. per capita paper consumption has tripled from 1940 to 1980 (200 to 600 pounds) and tripled from 1980 to 1990 (to 1,800 pounds).
- One weekday edition of the New York Times, contains more information than average citizens of 17th century England came across in their entire lifetime.

Because technology can evolve much faster than we can, our natural capacity to process information is likely to be increasingly inadequate to handle the surfeit of change, choice, and challenge that is characteristic of modern life.

— Robert Cialdini, Psychologist

- It is estimated that more information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous 5000 years. Nine thousand periodicals are published in the U.S. each year, and about a thousand books per day are published throughout the world.
- In 1985, the world spent 15 billion minutes on the telephone (talking, faxing, and sending data); the figure increased to 60 billion minutes by 1995. By the year 2000, the figure is expected to reach 95 billion minutes. (BT/MCI Global Communications Report).
- Accountemps, Inc., commissioned a survey of 200 executives of large American companies and learned that the execs spend 10.7% of their total work time looking for documents. That's about 6 weeks each year, looking for paper, which is not inexpensive to produce in the first place.
- Computer processing speed has doubled every two years for the last 30 years.
- Information has become more dense as well as more plentiful. Between 1965 and 1995, the average television advertisement shrunk from 53.1 seconds to 25.4 seconds. T.V. news "sound bites" have shrunk as well, from 42.3 seconds to 8.3 seconds during the same period.

In my company, staff is wired 24 hours a day. When people get up they start chatting. Two weeks ago, I asked my secretary to get someone on the phone and her answer was, "Oh he just stepped into the shower." But this is no joke. Being wired all the time is the shape of the future.

— Johan Helsingus, CEO Eunet Finland Oy

- In the early 70's, Americans were barraged by at least 560 advertising messages - per day. In the early 90's, the number jumped to 3,000 messages per day.
- The average sales representative spends 25 minutes per day playing telephone tag, according to Rueckgauer Systems Associates, located in Washington, D.C.
- A recent survey of more than a thousand employees of Fortune 1,000 companies found that workers send and receive an average of 178 messages each day through voice mail, e-mail, faxes and pagers. (Survey conducted by the Institute for the Future, the Gallup Organization, Pitney Bowes and San Jose State University.)
- One-dimensional mobile phones are becoming old fashioned in some markets. In Finland, cellular phones are now commonly used to send e-mail and allow users to connect to news groups and Web sites on the Internet, while riding a train, standing at a street corner, or eating lunch in a restaurant.

Data Smog

David Shenk calls all this information, "data smog", and he had a book out in 1997 by the same title, *Data Smog, Surviving the Information Glut*. He describes it as:

... the noxious muck and druck of the information age. Data smog gets in the way; it crowds out quiet moments, and obstructs much-needed contemplation. It spoils conversation, literature, and even entertainment. It thwarts skepticism, rendering us less sophisticated as consumers and citizens. It stresses us out.

Data smog is not just the pile of unsolicited catalogs and spam arriving daily in our home and electronic mailboxes. It is also information that we pay handsomely for, that we crave –

the seductive, mesmerizing quick-cut television ads and the twenty-four-hour up-to-the-minute news flashes. It is the faxes we request as well as the ones we don't; it is the misdialed numbers and drippy sales calls we get during dinnertime; but it is also the Web sites we eagerly visit before and after dinner, the pile of magazines we pore through every month, and the dozens of channels we flip through whenever we get a free moment."

It's too much. It's overwhelming and we have to bring it under control. As Columbia University's Eli Noam says, "The real issue for future technology, does not appear to be production of information and certainly not transmission. Almost anybody can add information. The difficult question is now to reduce it." How to reduce it and, I might add, how to manage it.

The ultimate irony of (our) findings is that the information age (has) spawned such an uninformed and uninvolved population.

— Andrew Kohurt

Information vs. Knowledge

To be useful, information needs to increase knowledge, deepen understanding and jump-start insight. If all the information that is produced today were useful, we would be more knowledgeable, have increased comprehension and probably a lot more creative. Are we? Some, such as David Shenk, would argue that we are not.

Shenk argues, rather effectively, that all the information bombarding us has created less clarity. Take any point of view he says, and you will find six alternative research studies. Certainly when one listens to politicians, it is difficult to sort out who is describing reality as it is, and who is engaging in political rhetoric. Perhaps all sides.

Surveys of the American populace would suggest we are not smarter or better informed. The ignorance of the American general population about world affairs is legendary, hardly noteworthy any more as it has been documented so thoroughly. Has it improved since more information, almost totally free, has become available to everyone?

The human brain is still infinitely superior to anything made of silicon. If you drop a ton of apples on a computer, it will never come up with the theory of gravity.

—Dr. David Lewis, British psychologist

Again, Shenk, in very strong language:
After a steady series of breakthroughs in information technology, we are left with a citizenry that is certainly no more interested or capable of supporting a healthy representative democracy than it was fifty years ago, and may well be less capable. This is a stark contrast to the luxurious promises of the techno-utopians.

All this technology and subsequent information, Shenk points out, is creating a world that is so complex that each of us understands less and less about it. Where we once used to be able to lift up the hood of our cars, and tinker with the engine to make it run, that is impossible today. I remember my first car, and while being mechanically-challenged, I was able at 16 years of age get my car's faltering engine to run smoothly. Today, when my car's electronic door locks don't operate, I take my car to the car dealer, and they insert a brand new computer into the door. I wouldn't even attempt to analyze or fix the problem myself.

Some analysts believe that all this technology will lead to a "downteching" movement. Hugh Heclo, of George Mason University, warns:

Expect the downtech movement to grow. In the long run, excesses of technology mean that the comparative advantage shifts from those with information glut to those with ordered knowledge from those who can process vast amounts of throughput to those who can explain what is worth knowing and why.

"The moral is, the price of technological know-how includes a pound of flesh."
— David Shenk, Data Smog

The Space of Technology

How can we gain control over information flow? Before we can answer this question, **which I think we can to a large degree with applications of Time Manager philosophy,** we must first understand how technology shapes us.

A Zen master asks one of his students what is the most important thing about a cup. The bewildered students guesses the handle, the brim, the bowl. "None of these" replies the Zen monk. "It is the space the cup creates." What is the space that technology creates in our minds, organizations and society?

Neil Postman in his book, Technopoly, explains, a la Marshall McLuhan (the medium is the message), that each new technology has embedded in its own world view. Our tools shape how we view the world. Postman writes, "Once a technology is admitted (into our world), it plays out its own hand; it does what it is designed to do. Our task is to understand what that design is."

We're pushing ourselves to speeds beyond which it appears we were designed to live. Man wakes up today and electric technology speeds up his mind to an extraordinary degree, but his body stays in place. This gap causes a lot of stress. Your mind is empowered with the ability to float out into the electronic void, being everywhere at once. You are no longer flesh and blood.

— Nelson Thall, Director of Research, University of Toronto's Marshall McLuhan Center

Take e-mail for example. If we simply adopt e-mail as a new technology, we may not understand how it differs from so-called "snail-mail", and thereby end up using it as simply faster, cheaper, more accessible mail. Instead of handling 10 pieces of correspondence a day, I can easily end up with 200 pieces of e-mail. I would never think of handling 200 letters a day and still think I could get anything else done, but that is what many people are attempting to do with e-mail.

And to make matters worse, many people actually print out their e-mail, so they really do end up with 200 pieces of correspondence. And regular mail hasn't been reduced that much since we've replaced regular mail with faxes. E-mail is just on top of all our communication tools.

Because of the ease with which we can save e-mail, many people save everything that comes to them electronically. I met a fellow in one of my Time Manager seminars - years ago - who had already saved 1,700 e-mail messages in his files. Knowledge or useless information - you decide.

Perhaps the biggest price we pay for this increased information is that expectations have gone up dramatically as to what we are presumed to be able to do.

Harvard economist Juliet Shor reports that technology was predicted to save us from excessively long hours. But, as Shor points out in her book, *The Overworked American,* we are working 164 hours more per year than we did 20 years ago. "Technology", reports Shor, "reduces the amount of time it takes to do any one task but also leads to the expansion of tasks that people are expected to do. This is what happened to American housewives over the twentieth century as they got new household appliances. They didn't actually do less work - they did more things. It's what happens to people when they get computers and faxes and cellular telephones and all of the new technologies that are coming out today."

What's the solution? I'd like to suggest that using the concept of Time Manager's decision base is a way to cap the problem of excess information. It may not solve the problem entirely, but it can give us a handle. In this report, you will find:

1. Three evaluation tools, which you can use on yourself, and with your classes if you like. I would greatly appreciate any feedback or useful modifications you make to them so I can make better use of them in my own Time Manager seminars.

2. Some computer and paper equivalencies to make sure we are all talking about the same things.

3. Filing tips, based on Key Areas - questions and answers.

4. E-mail tips. (Many of these ideas came from participants in my seminars.)

Evaluation Tools

Self-Evaluation Assessment

Using the following scale, indicate how the following items apply to you.

Indicators of Problems:
3: Frequently/Generally Applies to Me
2: Sometimes/Occasionally Applies to Me
1: Rarely/Doesn't Apply to Me

___ 1) I have to open several computer files to find what I am looking for.

___ 2) Except for broadly stated categories, I do not know what is on my floppy diskettes.

___ 3) My computer's speed is compromised because I've got too much stored on it, or I have to add a bigger drive to keep up with all the disk space I use for data storage.

___ 4) If someone needs to get onto my computer to find something when I am not there, I would have difficulty explaining where things are located.

___ 5) I have an organizing system for my computer desk top that is different from my paper files.

___ 6) I have to look at my computer, rather than a "to do" list to see what computer tasks need to be done, or which computer correspondence needs to be handled.

___ 7) If my computer failed, I would be in deep trouble. I am generally not well backed up.

___ 8) The main criterion I use to decide whether to save something on my computer is ease. If I had to take the trouble of putting the same document in a paper file, I'd probably throw it away.

___ 9) Confidential documents and information stored on my computer are not secure.

___ 10) I make paper copies of information that could just as well remain electronic.

How to score:

15 and under: You are doing great! In fact, we need to take lessons from you!

16 - 20: Probably your system works a good deal of the time for you. Why not aim for perfection? Get some of those scores down!

21 - 25: You probably are having difficulties on a regular basis. Be careful, you are on the edge of total chaos.

26 - 30: How do you manage? You probably find yourself swearing at your computer and undoubtedly have difficulties finding documents.

Warning Signs:

- We're using a smaller sized font on our business cards so we can list all our contact addresses.
- More than half my e-mail is from people I don't know.
- I have unread messages in my mailbox that are more than 72 hours old.
- The Web has replaced television for me.
- It frequently takes me more than half an hour to listen to all my voice mail messages.

How Much Information is Trying to get my Attention?

List all the technological accesses to you. For example, list all your telephone numbers, fax numbers, cell phone numbers, voice mail, faxes, e-mail, paging systems, and web addresses. Be sure to list all of them. For example, if you have a direct office line, list that one. And be sure to list the general office line or a line that someone would call and be transferred to you.

How many of your computers are networked? How does that affect information that is accessible to you?

On how many computers do you personally work?

This exercise is both exciting and devastating. And, remember, we aren't even counting in-person contacts or regular mail. My experience is that most of us simply have no idea how many ways we can be reached by other people. The last time I did this, I quickly listed 16 telephone numbers, voice mail systems or internet connections where people can readily reach me. Ten years ago, I had a mere three!

Is there any way you can simplify or reduce the number of accesses to you? Which accesses work best for you? How could you encourage people to use those?

What are Your Biggest Failure or Success Points?

List **all** the tasks you need to do during your next regular work day. List everything. Make estimates on the number of telephone calls, e-mail messages, snail mail, etc. to which you will respond.

Rank order these tasks from 1 to however many tasks you have listed in terms of how likely they are to get done. Let "1" be the task you are mostly likely to complete.

If you think this is too complicated, rank order the following situations as to whether you would likely respond.

___ 1) The telephone on your desk rings, and you answer it.

___ 2) You check your e-mail account and discover several messages that require a response. You respond to them.

___ 3) You get a request for action in a letter. You immediately respond to the letter.

___ 4) Your pager suddenly goes off, or starts vibrating. You return the call.

___ 5) Someone walks up to your desk and asks for something. You handle the request

___ 6) You've been away from your desk for a period of time, and now you notice that your voice mail is signaling that you have a message waiting. You check the message and respond to it.

___ 7) A fax is suddenly placed on your desk addressed to you. You respond to it.

___ 8) Your cellular phone starts to ring. You answer it.

___ 9) Someone drops a message on your desk that a family member is trying to reach you. You call your family.

___ 10) You have a meeting this afternoon that requires preparation. You prepare for it now.

Now do a little analysis. Can you see a pattern in how you respond? What is the basis for your response to all these points of contact? Is all the information you receive, and the points of contact connected to you, helping you get the right things done? Or are they interfering?

Computer and Paper Equivalencies

Listed below are words used for Paper Files and their equivalent words used for computer files. It is important to understand these equivalencies, because sometimes you need to follow the good practices of one set of storage and organization, and in other cases, you need to do quite the opposite. In part, the medium dictates the problems or possibilities you face with either paper or computer storage and organization.

Paper Storage	Equivalent Computer Storage
Filing Cabinet Used to store paper documents.	**Hard Disk** Used to store electronic documents and software programs.
Briefcase For papers you carry with you.	**Portable Computer and Disks** For electronic documents you carry with you.
Office Files Shared files for entire office.	**Networked Computers** Computers connected to multiple drives in various locations, sharing disk drives, printers, tape backups.
File Index Overview of contents of file drawers.	**Windows Explorer, File Manager, Macintosh Finder** Visual overview of all programs.
File Drawers Generally contains a category of files.	**File Directory** Category of subdirectories. On Macintosh these are called folders.
Hanging Files All files related to a category.	**File Subdirectory** Files related to a file directory.
Manila File Contains papers related to smallest category.	**Computer File** A single document.

Filing Tips

Part of the problem with filing is that there's so much stuff to keep organized. And all this data "resides across many different vessels - Time Manager entries, office computer data, portable computer data, electronic organizer data, disk files, current office files and office files", to quote a friend and Time Manager user, Jeffrey Dunn of Singapore. Retrieval becomes very difficult because the possibilities of where to file items are almost endless.

We're exceptional at storing information. But there are retrieval limitations. We get overloaded. We know the name of that high school friend. It is in our memory somewhere, but we can't quite get to it.

— Robert Bjork. UCLA memory expert

Someone once said that our brains are capable of learning one million languages, if there were that many languages around. The real challenge is finding the right word, even in our mother tongue!

Every piece of data or information we store adds to the filing retrieval problem, whether mental, computer or paper. Fifty megabytes of memory space on a computer is the equivalent of roughly 18,000 pages of text. That's a lengthy book! And at least a single book would have some embedded structure in it, and most likely a table of contents and hopefully an index at the back, making it relatively easy to find information.

Remember, the average executive spends six hours a week trying to find information or documents. Storing documents is easy for the computer. The interface to the human brain is the weak link.

As the world becomes more and more complex, and we have access to more and more data, and more and more people can contact us virtually anywhere in the world, some kind of "reattachment" is necessary. David Shenk argues in *Data Smog* that this reattachment is becoming increasingly unavailable to us. I agree that this reattachment is becoming increasingly more challenging, but I don't think that it is unattainable.

We need some kind of overview to sort through and organize this morass of information. Clearly, categories are required to rescue us. And the best categories are those that are linked to the areas where we need to achieve results. **We are talking about Key Areas.**

Tom Davenport, Professor at the University of Texas in Austin, says that we need to construct a "personal information environment" that suits our needs. "Then you can begin thinking about the kinds of 'buckets' you might want to use to store your information. This will take a pretty high level of personal investment and I don't see many people doing it." **He is talking about Key Areas.**

Some people argue that using Key Areas as the basis for a file structure means that if your Key Areas change (such as in a job transfer or redefinition), then your files would also have to be adjusted, creating a lot of extra work. That's true, but so what?

If the purpose of information is to enable us to accomplish something, that something is our Key Area results. If our Key Areas change, our information, and by definition the way we access this information, should also change.

I definitely believe (workers) don't have a more simplified life because of communication tools. Each new technology leads to a lot of inefficiencies. People try to accommodate (the change) but it ends up creating four times the amount of labor.

Nancy Ozawa, Director of Strategic Planning Groups, Institute for the Future

An unreasonable demand would be to expect that **one way of organizing our files should work regardless of what we are trying to achieve.** If achieving results should direct our choices with time, then surely these same result areas would also be an appropriate basis for organizing information—to hopefully help us achieve these same results.

Many course participants feel that the Time Manager concept is too complicated for them. They would prefer to use a calendar and a simple organizer. With all the information pretty much attacking everyone, any system (filing or planning tool) that lacks overview is only going to add to the confusion most people find themselves in today.

How to File: Questions and Answers

• **Where should I file documents?** File things where you would look for them. What's the cue that you will think of when you start looking for this item? Put the document or paper in that place. Most of us file intellectually, but we retrieve emotionally. When we file we ask the question: *Where is the best and most logical place to store this document?* But when we go to find it, we ask an emotional question: *Where is that bloody document?*

Ask yourself this question whenever you file: *If I were looking for this document right now, where would I be looking for it?* Then put it there, because that's most likely where you will look for it. Forget being logical when you file. File for ease of retrieval.

• **What should be the relationships between my electronic files and my paper files?** Have your electronic file headings shadow your paper files. Set your paper files up according to your Key Areas. Do the same thing with your computer files. Use folders named with your Key Areas. Do the same for your e-mail.

• **How many categories should I have in my files?** In paper files, most of us probably have too many categories. This makes it difficult for us to not only file items (There are so many possibilities to place things!), but also to find them (There are so many places to look!). The rule with paper files is that it is better to have one file folder with one hundred sheets of paper in it, than fifty file folders with two sheets of paper in each.

Of course, people bring the information glut on themselves, and some even become addicted to massive amounts of message traffic. On vacation, they miss that titillating quality of fast communications.

—David Shenk, author

With computer files, we probably have too few categories. Since it is so very easy with Windows technology and on the Macintosh system to create file folders, create them to your heart's content. It's probably a good idea to never have more than 7 to 10 computer file directories or file subdirectories for each category so that it is easy to scan what is there. One exception to this would be if you were writing a book or seminar workbook and have your files divided up according to chapters.

• **Should you keep a copy of something in an electronic file or a paper file?** The temptation many of us have is to keep both, and in some cases that is not a bad idea. The real advantage of paper files is that you can transport them easily, spread them about on a table, pass them to someone else with little fuss, and hold them in your hands while you read from them in front of a group. If you need to print something out of your computer to use it well, then it should probably be in a paper file. If you need to take something with you to a meeting where having your computer available is not possible or appropriate, then keep a paper file.

The real advantage of computer files is that you can edit them easily and print out many copies, making changes in the documents and effortlessly send them electronically. If this is how you will primarily use a document, then keep a document copy on your computer. Some people literally have paper copies of everything they have on their computer. This is definitely not necessary.

Some Commonly Asked Questions about Computer Files

• **How should I view my computer files?** You have several choices: by icons (large and small), by size, by kind, by date, by name, or by label. Make choices work to your advantage. If you only use one view for all your files, you probably aren't getting the best advantage out of your computer's file capacity. For example, if you have a list of customers, then probably organizing them by name is a good idea, because you can scan alphabetically for your clients. Sometimes using the icons is useful for a quick visual view of what is in a particular file directory, or folder. Obviously, some files are better organized by date because you refer to them based on when they were produced.

Remember, if you can't find something in a hurry, click on your file view button and select a different way of viewing your files. You may be able to find something that way, rather than opening up several poorly named documents.

• **How should I name my computer files?** Some systems limit the number of characters you can use to name a file. So, you have to be a bit imaginative. Other systems give you many more. My Macintosh allows me to use 31 characters, which is almost always more than enough.

...upgrades are the lifeblood of the information industry. Understanding the ramifications of this fact is critical to a complete comprehension of the new social dynamics of the information society.
— David Shenk, Data Smog

Eight characters, which is what many systems allow you, may be a challenge. This is where subcategories of files come in handily. For example, if you have a Client Key Area, then behind it you may have names of your Clients on folders, and then behind each client folder, you have subcategories such as: sales letters (with date and main topic labels), proposals (with type of program and date), notes (with date and main topic labels; or the name of a person particularly valuable if you are communicating with several clients in the same organization). You can also have an e-mail file folder. But before you file into this folder, make sure you have a good label on the e-mail, or you'll be opening those documents as well to find out what is in them.

Choose your own file labels. Save your document files in a separate directory or folder from the ones in which your software programs are kept. If you allow your computer to label your document files, the choices that it will make for you are almost useless. If you have a bunch of documents with those almost indecipherable labels such as (doc.1.wpd), I'd suggest you trash them. HOWEVER, do be careful not to trash files that are necessary for a software program to run.

And finally a word of caution. When you decide to save a new file, your computer will automatically place it in the last directory or folder or subdirectory in which you were working. This could include a software program file, which makes it difficult to find documents, unless you labeled them very well and find them through your Find (Finder on the Macintosh) function. Be alert when you close new documents. It can save you a lot of time. Personally, I think there's something wrong with the way you've set up your filing system if you have to use the Find or Finder function with any frequency.

• **Should I use a pending computer file?** This is entirely up to you. People who use a pending file, put documents there temporarily while they are working on them. This means you have one place to go to when you open your computer instead of going to where you will eventually store your work. For example, I could put this TMI*Knowhow* article in a pending file, along with a marketing brochure that is not completed, and a proposal to a client. This can save you a few key strokes or a few clicks and points. Personally, I don't use a pending file, because there are times when I am working on a document and then don't get back to it for several days, or possibly even weeks. I can easily forget I put the document in a Pending file and I find myself going to the place where the document will eventually be stored. After doing this a few times, I got rid of my pending file.

• **How about an Out Box file on your computer desk file?** Again, this is up to you. This would be work that would normally be in your paper out box, such as work you need to print, fax, or send when you are using your modem. Personally, I would find such a file redundant to the pending file. But if it makes sense to you, give it a try. Always come back to the question: Am I forced to look in several places to find documents? If so, your organization system is not working to its maximum.

You shouldn't just read your mail. You've got to process your mail. Answer, delete or categorize the messages in your in-box, but don't just surf through them. That's what's deadly.

— Ira Chaleff, President Institute for Business Technology, Inc.

• **What if I work on a networked computer?** If you are on a PC that is networked, put your personal files on one drive, so you can maintain some confidentiality and control over your own work.

• **Should I back up my files?** This is like saying, "Should I floss my teeth?" The answer any good dentist will tell you is: "Only the ones you want to keep." And the only files you should back up are the ones you want to keep in case of disk failure. Obviously, an external back up file is good protection against data loss. It's also a good idea to externally back up your files and take them off our hard disk if you aren't using them regularly. This will probably increase your system performance and then you can go out and buy some more software programs and use up all that memory you just freed up!

One of the relatively recent products available for external data storage are Zip drives, which store an enormous amount of data. They are inexpensive and easy to use, and you can back up literally everything that is on your hard disk, including your software programs.

You have to watch yourself; if you respond to every message you'll drive yourself crazy. It would be as if you participated in every conversation in the hallway and at the water cooler.

— Jerry Grochow, Chief Technology Officer, American Management Systems

If you use a Zip drive on your portable computer, it will require carrying the drive and a serial cable with you. Putting data on floppy disks might make for easier transfer between portable and office computers.

Note: Word Perfect has a system that reads a diskette and prints out a copy of each diskette's directory. This saves you the hassle of inserting your floppy disks into your computer and reading the contents on your computer desk top. A definite time saver and lets you feel more in control of what is probably turning now into hundreds of disks you have somewhere near your desk.

Evaluating Your Filing System

• **Once a month, ask yourself:** Does my filing system continue to make sense given what I am trying to achieve? As our work and lives change, so too does our filing system need to be adjusted. If, when you ask this question, you are not sure about the answer, then leave it and ask it again in another month's time. Chances are, if you're still not sure about the appropriate answer to this question after you've asked it a few times, your filing system could benefit from some reorganization.

• **Get some advice.** If you are totally confused about whether your information is organized effectively, get some advice. You are probably too close to your system to see how it might be more effectively organized. There's also a good chance you need to completely start over and redesign your system, rather than just trying to patch up an inherently defective system of information organization.

E-mail

Nobody has the rules down yet. People don't know what type of message to send for what. The things we use as enablers are abused and misunderstood and consume our lives and time. They make the stress level extremely high.

A'isha Ajaya, Asst. Professor of Technology, Rochester Institute of Technology

E-mail is here to stay. The convenience, speed and price are absolutely right for the modern world. For twenty U.S. dollars per month, I can use America On Line and have access to my accounts around the entire world for the cost of a local telephone call, virtually wherever I travel.

Even overloaded e-mail users, say they would refuse to give up their e-mail. It's more efficient than telephone tag, boring meetings, faxes (which have to be handed to you), or even voice mail. No one would ever send an e-mail reading: Please e-mail me at JaBarlow@aol.com. There will always be a message contained in the e-mail. This doesn't always happen with telephone messages and voice mail.

Jack Suess, Associate Director of computing at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County says he has "given up on voice mail. I just find it too inefficient time-wise. I tell people who really want to reach me to call the secretary and she will take the message and e-mail me. "I have stopped giving my voice mail number at TMI USA to course participants and clients. Rather I give them my e-mail address and ask them to contact me that way.

At the same time, these very characteristics that make it so attractive means it easily can get out of control. Participants in my seminars talk about receiving upwards of 200 e-mail messages per day. And large numbers of them require quick responses. I personally spend approximately two hours per day reading, composing and filing e-mail. One person told me it was not unusual for him to receive 800 e-mails a day!

When Honeywell, Inc. improved Internet access for its worldwide users, e-mail traffic to its corporate offices jumped from about 30,000 messages per month to around 500,000 messages per month. So reports Tom Doyle, project leader for e-mail integration at Honeywell in Minneapolis.

I don't know which is scarier: information overload or having information screened out by a soulless machine.

David Shenk,author

Some companies use e-mail much in the same way they use their telephones. This requires people to mostly be at their desks, and to have their systems perpetually turned on. Their computers beep at them when a message comes through. I know of companies where people will send such e-mail messages as: "Have you seen Julia lately? Let me know." Most people don't use e-mail this way, but I don't know anyone whose number of e-mail messages hasn't increased enormously the longer they use the technology.

And many people leave more than one kind of technological message because they don't trust that just one message will get through to the intended person. So, they leave a voice mail, e-mail, send a fax (and slip a hard copy of the fax in the mail - just in case), and further try to reach a live human to carry the message in person. Hotels regularly do this. In many in which I stay, I get my messages on voice mail, hard copy message from the front desk, and then on the television. It's TOO MUCH! In effect any new technology is laid right next to existing technology, without replacing it.

The problem is when there are 250 messages in their in-box, people can't distinguish the handful of messages that are related to the results they want to achieve. "Summarizer" technology of context-sensitive filtering, is one of the newest ideas to help with e-mail swamped users. The new technology, though still somewhat primitive at this point, automatically summarizes e-mail's key points into 20 or 30 words. A legitimate question is whether more technology will solve the problem that has caused this problem in the first place.

Some top-level executives have created their own filtering systems, a staff position called "mission control". This employee or team or employees help top-level staffers sort through pertinent information. Secretaries used to do this, but with the advent of computers, many secretarial positions were eliminated. Mission control staffers sift through a multitude of communications systems, not just the phone, but including the Internet, news groups, Notes programs, and on and on.

E-mail has grown faster than rules concerning its use. A Society for Human Resource Management (Alexandria, Virginia) survey revealed that almost all its members' employees use e-mail, though only 36% have outlined appropriate usage to their employees.

Most companies don't want to play big brother to their employees, but outlining ground rules is only fair to employees. E-mail policy can be broad or specific. Neil Pitts, Eastman Kodak's manager of strategic infrastructure, has kept Kodak's simple. "It simply says that all communication within the company is for business purposes - and that includes e-mail," states Pitts. Hallmark Cards has four and a half pages to describe their e-mail approaches.

I am going to guess that when people get mailbox saturation, 80% of the time it is caused by automated mailers.

— Tom Sloane, Analyst, Aberdeen Group, Inc.

Here are some ideas you can implement to make your e-mail work better for you. At a minimum, these ideas will help you keep your e-mail under wraps before it gets out of control, which it will easily do if you don't think through the ramifications of this latest technology. E-mail experts warn that unless we learn to manage e-mail with daily discipline and some kind of filtering technology, we will suffer from lower productivity and higher stress. A definite warning sign of e-mail overload is a backlog of unread messages, which 15% of Computerworld's survey of 100 IS professionals admit.

29 E-mail Tips

Reading and Responding to E-mail:

1. Respond at specific times to your e-mail. For example, choose at least one a.m. and one p.m. period when you will systematically clear your messages.
2. Start looking at your messages from the bottom up. This way you get the most recent messages first. Sometimes it will mean you don't even have to read an earlier version.

Too many managers still believe that if people are simply hooked up to each other, they will form communities. It doesn't quite work that way.

— Richard Farson, author Management of the Absurd: Paradoxes in Leadership

3. If you have a large number of messages, scan the headings first. This is the same principle as scanning the contents of your in-tray. If your senders use good headers, you will probably have a good idea as to what is in the e-mail.
4. Don't necessarily answer your e-mail when you first arrive at the office. Instead, scan it for anything that absolutely has to be handled right now. In this way, follow the principles of clearing your in-tray when you first enter your office. Scan for urgent high-value communications and do those.
5. Use e-mail as a filler task between larger tasks. When you have a few minutes, or your brain can't cope with budgetary figures for a minute longer, dip into your e-mail. In effect, use the principle of doing don't forget tasks and apply it to e-mail.
6. Organize your messages by sender. Sometimes people send follow-up messages, which change requirements of previous messages.
7. Organize your e-mail by Urgent and Non-urgent. Look at the non-urgent items later, or at the end of the day when you are tired and don't have the energy to respond to something critical.
8. Evaluate your e-mail by who sent it. Some senders may deserve reading whenever they send a message.
9. If you get too much e-mail, get off e-mail lists. It takes time to delete all those messages, even if you don't open them. Just one high-volume Internet listserv may send you 30 or more messages per day. New subscribers to the Internet will set up for four or five listservs, until the novelty wears off and the stress sets in.
10. Be careful of software filters and automatic paging notification systems. They can help, but they aren't the final answer. Robert W. Lucky, CorporateVice President for Applied Research at Bellcore in Morristown, New Jersey, warns: "I've used software filters and automatic paging notification for 'urgent' e-mail message, but I gave it up. Word got out that I was using such a program, and everyone was careful to use that word." Lucky believes the filters are"modestly effective," but often fail to notify him about messages from external people who were very important, but the filter didn't know it.

Sending E-mail:

11. Use good labels when you send e-mail messages. Don't just reply using the old label that was on the e-mail sent to you if the header no longer applies. I recently received a message that was labeled: Re: Re: Re: Re: CIAG. That e-mail message had been through a few renditions.

E-mail is an open duct into your central nervous system. It occupies the brain and reduces productivity.

— Michael Dertouzos, Director, M.I.T's Laboratory for Computer Science

12. As a general rule, only put one major message per e-mail. This makes labeling easier, and your reader doesn't have to read the entire document to have a general sense as to what it contains. Keep your e-mail short. Attach relevant documents if you need more space.

13. Be careful with abbreviations. Not everyone knows what they mean (for example, IMHO means "In my humble opinion"), and your reader can feel stupid or left out, or worse yet, spend precious minutes asking others what these abbreviations mean.

14. And be sure you don't spam. Spamming is a word that comes by way of a Monty Python skit about Vikings setting out on a trip and stopping by for breakfast. They ask for spam and eggs, spam and bacon, spam and spam, spam with spam and eggs....etc. Spamming is the mass transmittal of unsolicited electronic messages. Very soon the practice may be illegal. It's more a question of how spamming will be regulated, rather than if it will be regulated. It irritates the receiver, and you run the risk of getting spammed by thousands of irate e-mail users.

    The basic rule is never send e-mail unsolicited – never, ever! If someone spams you,

save all the data from the leader and send it to your service provider. Spamming is often grounds for being kicked off the service.

15. Find out how your reader likes to have his or her e-mail labeled. Good headings include: Urgent (U), Information (I), Action Required (AR). Discuss at your meetings how a team of people can communicate clearly with their e-mail labels.

16. When you respond to an e-mail, make a clear reference to the note to which you are responding. I receive e-mails that say, "Glad to do it for you, Janelle." or "Yes, I'd love to." I wrote them an e-mail so many e-mail messages ago, I have no idea to what they are referring.

17. Should you copy the entire e-mail message to which you are responding? Some People do this. Personally, I don't like it. It means more text I have to scan through. There's no clear protocol on this yet. At the most, copy only the relevant portions of messages to which you are responding.

I think the missing piece in a lot of the e-mail chat you see today is this level of leadership and support. Computer conferencing requires a lot of staffing, but it's essential if the goal is to mobilize intellectual capital and apply it to the complex predicaments of today's organizations.

— Richard Farson, author

18. Don't automatically copy yourself on every message you send. It's more information to manage and sort through.

19. Don't write using all capitals. This is a simple one. It looks like you are shouting. But some people use it all the time and have no idea OF the impact of their messages.

20. Don't immediately send an e-mail if you are unsure as to the impact of your message. Let it sit for a few hours and then send it. Once you hit that send button, you can't get it back! E-mail feels like informal conversation, but you don't have body language and voice tone to moderate the exactness of language. Lots of people are using smiley faces in their messages to soften impact. Personally, I prefer to be precise in my communication so I don't have to use those symbols.

21. Be careful what you forward. I get lots of e-mail messages that are clearly made up stories, warning alerts on viruses. Think it through. If it's unbelievable, then it probably is someone pulling a prank on the internet. Don't encourage it by passing it along to dozens of other people.

22. Don't send multiple forms of messages to people - a voice mail, and a fax, and an e-mail. Let people know what your patterns of responding to e-mail are, so they feel comfortable that you have received the message. And if something requires a response, get back to the person so they aren't left wondering if you received the message in the first place.

23. Be judicious in your "forwarding" of e-mail. Just because it's easy to do, it doesn't mean it's a good idea. Would you take the time and trouble to photocopy a message and fax or mail it to someone? If the answer is "no", then chances are you shouldn't forward that e-mail message. Think of the reader's overload.

24. Use e-mail for quick updates, scheduling meetings, asking questions. Don't use it for information that will provoke a strong emotional response in the reader (such as firing someone!). E-mail, since it's read rather than listened to, may appear harsher in tone than you intended.

A lot of people don't understand that just because you erased the message, it's not gone from the system.

— Michael Underhill, Legal Partner

25. Keep your messages businesslike. Check spelling and punctuation. E-mail reflects your company. Don't put something in e-mail that you wouldn't feel comfortable on corporate letterhead.

26. Remember, e-mail is not private. As Jenny McCune, e-mail expert says, e-mail is more like a postcard that anyone can read, rather than like a first class letter.

Filing E-mail:

27. Set up file folders for e-mail. Base the folders on your Key Areas and put your e-mail in them if you decide to save your e-mail.

28. Also keep in mind that when you delete an e-mail from your computer, it doesn't mean it's deleted from the network.

And Finally:

29. If you want to read more about e-mail etiquette check out: http://www.iwillfollow.com/email.html or http://www.wp.com/fredfish/netiq.html

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