

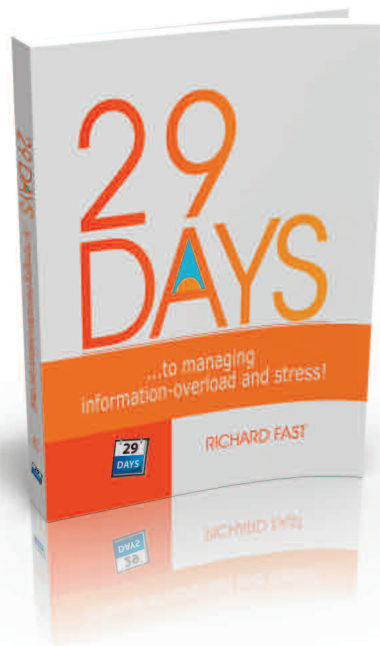
**Your organization can put an end to  
losing thousands of dollars each  
pay period, and what's more,  
you can dramatically increase  
productivity in just 29 days!**

**(Reading Time: approximately 15:00 minutes)**

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May 2018**

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## Information-overload and Digital Distraction Is on the Rise!

Digital overload may be the defining problem of today's workplace. All day and night we're bombarded with so many messages and alerts that even when we want to focus, it's nearly impossible. This culture of constant connection takes a toll both professionally and personally. We waste time, attention, and energy on relatively unimportant information and interactions, staying busy but producing little of value.

~ *Harvard Business Review*, 2016

### Your Smartphone Is Making You Stupid, Antisocial and Unhealthy. So Why Can't You Put It Down?!

*The Globe and Mail*, January 16, 2018

### Tech Can Make Businesses Less Productive, Microsoft Survey Finds

*The Toronto Star*, Monday, February 5, 2018

### Can We Ever Kick Our Smartphone Addiction?

*The Globe and Mail*, February 18, 2018

***The Information Overload Research Group***, a nonprofit consortium of business professionals, researchers, and consultants, reports that:

- knowledge-workers\* in the United States waste 25% of their time dealing with their huge and growing data streams, costing the economy more than \$1 trillion annually
- office workers typically take around 25 minutes to recover from interruptions before returning to their original task...resulting in hours of lost time each week
- due to distractions and interruptions, 40% of workers feel that they are unable to complete their important tasks because they've gone from plan-driven to interrupt-driven days

Practically every company in the industrialized world is negatively impacted by digital overload. In fact, it's the **#1 productivity killer** causing a "typical" office worker to *unknowingly* waste more than 8-hours of time each week. If your organization hasn't crafted a **"communication protocol"**, these staggering losses will continue unabated.

**... this paper offers a solution to *this* epidemic.**

\* See page 8 for a brief description of; What is a "knowledge-worker" and how is his/her productivity determined?

## **Preface**

Economists have been puzzled in recent years by the so-called “productivity paradox,” the fact that the digital revolution of the past four decades hasn’t resulted in big gains in output per worker as happened with earlier technological upheaval.

This may be hard to believe but recent independent studies by [McKinsey Global Institute](#), [Basex Research](#) and [Intel](#), confirmed that the *annual* cost of information-overload to business exceeds \$1 trillion in the United States alone!

Studies by Microsoft suggest that the cause of these staggering losses in productivity include: workers who are too distracted by a constant influx of e-mails, messages, notifications, texts and Tweets to concentrate for sustained periods; workers who aren’t properly trained to use the new technology effectively; and workers who suffer burnout because—with mobile devices and at-home working—they feel tethered to the job around-the-clock.

However, Microsoft isn’t saying technology dampens productivity in all cases, instead it contends that companies with a “strong digital culture”<sup>\*</sup> saw productivity gains from technology while those with a “weak digital culture” did not.

The first part of this paper shows how information-overload puts “knowledge-workers” and managers in a chronic state of stress and mental overload, which inevitably takes a massive toll on employee productivity and health. The second part offers a solution to overcome these challenges by creating an atmosphere that enhances “communication etiquette,” cooperation and increased productivity.

*\*Microsoft defined a “strong digital culture” as a “people journey” and not just an IT exercise. One where employees had proper training in technology, and where executives conveyed to employees a clear sense of how that technology fit into the company’s strategic vision.*

## **Part - I: The Problem**

- 1.1 Would you approve this job description?**
- 1.2 Information-overload, distractions and email: The silent killers of productivity**
- 1.3 Is the problem with technology or is it the corporate environment?**
- 1.4 Can we change the environment?**

## **Part - II: The Solution**

- 2.1 How do we evaluate, guide and influence the corporate environment?**
- 2.2 What’s the best way to influence permanent change in the corporate environment?**
- 2.3 Why 29 Days? How does this program work? What can we expect to happen after taking this 29 Days program?**
- 2.4 The Program: 29 Days ... to managing information-overload and stress!**
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## Part I: The Problem

### 1.1 Would *you* approve this job description?

**POSITION: Senior Manager, Corporate Advisor**

**Your duties are to:**

- Spend at least 30% of your day reading, processing and managing email requests
- Lead by example. You'll demonstrate that "effective" employees are ready to drop whatever they're doing to tend to interruptions, incoming emails and other unsolicited requests throughout the day
- Show round-the-clock responsiveness to electronic requests ... including evenings, weekends and vacations ... which will serve to inspire your co-workers to do the same
- Recognize that pressing problems and urgent matters take precedence over long-range planning, analysis and strategic focus
- Encourage the use of email when communicating so there's a written record of everyone's activities
- Urge employees to use "cc" and "Reply to All" when emailing to keep everyone in the loop

... of course you wouldn't approve this job description because it's a "perfect" recipe for inefficiency, shallow, dysfunctional thinking and burnout ... and yet many corporations are paying their managers and knowledge workers more than 20% of their wages for just that!

### 1.2 Information-overload, distractions and email: The silent killers of productivity

Research shows that information-overload costs "*uninformed*" knowledge workers at least one day a week, but where do these figures really come from? How are they measured? What are the actual underlying time-wasting mechanisms?

Information-overload is a mental state of continuous stress caused by a combination of elements:

- A. Misuse of information, communication and email**
- B. Incessant interruptions and distractions**
- C. The misuse of time in the "typical" corporate environment**

#### **A. Misuse of information, communication and email**

- Research repeatedly shows that as much as 75% of all email is internally generated with the much of it being unnecessary
- Managers and knowledge workers typically send and receive an average 110 emails a day resulting in 13-hours of processing email per week
- The average knowledge worker spends more than 25 percent of his or her work day on email related tasks

## B. Incessant interruptions and distractions

- Interruptions—anything that disengages one’s active focus on meaningful work—consume on average 2.1 hours per day. Interruptions are an even bigger time-loss than email, but are often overlooked because they don’t accumulate like email which makes them less visible
- Due to distractions, knowledge workers frequently switch tasks and change project focus resulting in as much as 6-hours of lost time each week
- Office workers typically take around 25 minutes to recover from interruptions before returning to their original task.

## C. The misuse of time in the “typical” corporate environment

The old cliché that “time is money” tends to suggest that they’re interchangeable values. They’re not! Ironically we’re often irrationally miserly with money but extravagantly wasteful with the irreplaceable commodity of time.

Andy Grove, *Intel’s* legendary founder, once noted that to buy a \$5,000 photocopier you must run a gauntlet of approvals, but to call a meeting of a dozen managers, whose time costs far more, you need none. That was in the seventies ... today it’s even worse. People often use meetings as a “convenient” time to tune-out and process email!

In a survey held by *Microsoft* among 38,000 employees—who spend on average 5.6 hours a week in meetings—69% of them rated meetings as ineffective and unproductive ... a staggering waste of time.

In today’s corporate environment of managing by reaction, we’ve devalued our time to the point that interruptions are taking precedence over a preplanned structured day. In many environments we’re “expected” to allow almost anyone to encroach on our time and demand that we share it with them simply because they sent us an email request.

If this is the common corporate culture—and it is—who would dare to buck the system? So we silently go along resulting in reduced productivity and high levels of stress.

### What are the intangible costs?

People are *not* a company’s most important asset ... “*thinking*” people are a company’s most important asset.

Although we can readily point to the “8-hours” of lost time each week as the most obvious cost of information-overload, what’s more damaging can’t be seen or measured. For example, if the very people who are hired to *think* aren’t *thinking*, then **the loss of mental acuity** is far more costly in terms of actual damage to the bottom line.

The human brain needs set periods of uninterrupted thought to invent, create and solve problems. But if

our days are filled with crisis, incessant interruptions and tactical responses, then surface thinking and shallow responses—to matters of serious importance—are all we can expect.

No corporation would deliberately create this atmosphere, but nonetheless it's the one that's most common.

### **1.3 Is the problem with technology or is it the corporate environment?**

Humans have an extraordinary capacity to accept the status quo and *resist change* even if that change signifies improvement.

For example, even though the compulsive messaging habits of most people are destructive, they continue to generate excessive email and feel obligated to reply to the endless stream of incoming requests because they believe in the old adage of “publish or perish.” They may feel that ...

- showing lots of email activity—even at all hours—allows them to be more prominently represented in the inboxes of their bosses, performance reviewers and associates
- using “cc” and “reply to all” as often as possible keeps them in front-of-mind of others
- generating and receiving lots of email enhances their self image
- creating a paper trail is necessary to “CYA” in case of a future dispute
- responding ASAP to incoming emails is part of their job

Everyone would benefit from less email but no one is willing to *risk* being the first to cut back. Being “mindful” of associates is obviously beneficial to any organization, but in the competitive environment of many corporations, it's *not* viewed as advantageous to the individual. Similarly, “most” people would welcome the option of turning off their “Smartphones” during the evenings and weekends but they fear doing so could be occupational suicide.

A 2012 study of 25,000 Canadian professionals found that 40 percent reported high levels of overload, both at work and at home. According to Statistics Canada, more than a quarter of Canadian workers describe their day-to-day lives as highly stressful. This has major implications for employers. Stress translates into lost productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism and more disability claims, with the total cost of mental health problems to employers pegged at about \$20-billion a year according to the Mental Health Commission of Canada. While not all of this can be attributed to work-life imbalance, Statscan reports that six in 10 highly stressed people identify work as their main source of stress.

### **1.4 Can we change the corporate environment?**

Absolutely, but before change can occur people need to intuitively understand the causes, effects and solutions to this information-overload epidemic.

Motivational presentations and quick-fix attempts will *not* change our deep-seated habits. They can't be changed by posting a list of email etiquette “dos” and “dont's”, or by the CEO mandating new policies and procedures. If you doubt this try ordering people to reduce their volume of email, or the frequency of their

status reports and see how effective that is!

According to Dr. Ben Searle, senior lecturer of Psychology at Macquarie University, information-overload is now a major source of psychological illness in the workplace and it's becoming an increasing problem.

Common solutions offered by managers such as only checking emails at certain times during the day were difficult to implement. If a culture exists where a reply to an email is expected straight away, it will not work. Real change must be embraced by the company as a whole.

Employees are powerless to change the corporate environment on their own, and although nearly everyone acknowledges that individuals, to varying degrees, pay a personal price in their struggles to manage information, few businesses have viewed the challenge as a corporate issue. However, for effective, sustainable change, management must be fully supportive of change and encourage active participation from the organization as a whole.

Is this a daunting task? Possibly, but with each knowledge worker “unknowingly” wasting “8-hours” each week because of information-overload, and the myriad intangible effects of unnecessary disruptions, stress and harried thinking, the *long-term benefits* to the organization will dwarf the effort.

## **Part II: 29 Days ... to managing information-overload and stress! A step-by-step solution to dramatically increase productivity**

### **2.1 How do we evaluate, guide and influence the corporate environment?**

It requires a general understanding of the present situation and agreement of what is possible and beneficial to change. With buy-in, commitment and belief, *your company* is going to reap the enormous benefits of an environment designed to overcome the insidious effects of information-overload and the stress it creates.

### **2.2 What's the best way to influence permanent change in the corporate environment?**

Through leadership and commitment. To admit that things may be less than perfect takes courage. Not surprisingly many leaders are unwilling to examine, and possibly change their corporate atmosphere. Introspection and honest evaluation is never easy, but nevertheless, it's the only way for an organization to achieve its true potential.

Whenever we try to change a behavior—whether as an individual or as an organization—there's the initial period of enthusiasm and positive results, but then, inexplicably over a period of just a few months, there's a strong tendency to slide back to old habits ... even if they're undesirable.

#### **Why Does This Happen?**

Because the underlying causes of the destructive behaviors remain. A corporation's culture is rooted in habits and behaviors, and behavioral change at that level requires commitment. Without corporate commitment and support, there's little chance of sustainable change, and what little change that may occur

is inevitably doomed to regression. *29 Days ... to managing information-overload and stress!* is a powerful solution that will inspire lasting change.

### **2.3 Why 29 Days? How does this program work? What can we expect to happen after taking this 29 Days program?**

#### **Why 29 Days?**

Because research has shown that the human brain does not learn through large glops of information. Most presenters, motivators, and seminars miss this concept. They manage to whip their audience into a short-term frenzy but that's essentially all you have, a short-term high followed by nothing. A resumption of the status quo—no action—just a return to exactly what was happening before the hyped-up presentation.

Neuroscientist John Medina asserts that learning new habits and behaviors take time. In fact, delivering information in deliberately spaced, repetitive cycles (which is what happens in this 29-day period), is the most effective way to fix memories and new habits into the brain.

#### **How does this program work?**

This online, interactive program reaches out to participants twice each day for 29 days. Each morning participants acquire key bits of information which transform into firsthand experience and self observation throughout the day. Each evening participants will be guided to reflect on that day's observations and how their present habits and behaviors—and the unseen forces of information-overload—are impacting their personal and professional lives. The “aha” realizations, and the direct experiences that will result begin to lay the foundation to powerful new habits, behaviors, understanding and beliefs.

Participants invest about 20 minutes each morning and evening in interactive learning, and because this program is online, there is no lost time attending meetings, seminars and workshops.

#### **What can we expect to happen after taking this 29 Days Program?**

This program is baptism by fire! Anyone who goes through the entire 29 days will experience a profound change in their thinking, awareness and understanding of the modern tools of information and communication. Participants will see firsthand how much time and effort they spend on misuse of information, email and multitasking, how little value results from it, and what they're giving up in exchange. This understanding will lead to dramatic changes in habits, behaviors and productivity. In *29 Days* participants will know how to:

- ✓ use email as a productivity tool *not* a communication tool
- ✓ write a “concise” email while considering its impact on the recipient
- ✓ take better control of time by becoming more proactive than reactive
- ✓ schedule blocks of uninterrupted time for maximum productivity
- ✓ pick up the phone instead of *automatically* texting or emailing
- ✓ overcome the *delusion* of multitasking
- ✓ delineate clear lines between work and leisure
- ✓ create effective to-do lists that result in prioritizing the most important tasks rather than the *easiest*
- ✓ participate in meetings so they become an empowering focus of creative energy rather than using the time to catch up on email



With knowledge-workers losing about one day each week to information-overload, addressing this problem is one of the highest-ROI actions any organization can take. In fact, reclaiming this lost time will not only pay immediate dividends to your company, it will dramatically improve the *participant's* quality of life.

### **How do we maintain our changes and avoid regression and backsliding?**

This is a great question because attempts to change organizational behavior are seldom sustainable, even if the changes are obvious and beneficial to everyone. All too often there's a strong tendency to slide back to old habits ... even if they're destructive, because the underlying causes of the behavior still remain.

This is precisely what the *29 Days* program addresses, and why it is so effective. It doesn't try to dictate behavior or tell participants what they "should" or "should not" do, because the human brain invariably rejects dictation. Instead, after 29 days, participants *collectively* define and then decide on the basic changes and solutions to texting, messaging, and general "communication etiquette" that *they choose*, and that distinction goes a long way to ensure genuine commitment and lasting change. But even then, sustainable change requires periodic checkups.

### **The 29 Days Program ... and the five steps to *permanent* change**

**Step One:** We begin with a general survey (questionnaire) to assess present conditions.

**Step Two:** Participants experience the *29 Days ... to managing information-overload and stress!* program.

**Step Three:** After 29 days, participants collectively define the desired changes in *communication etiquette* they wish to establish for their team or organization.

**Step Four:** At quarterly intervals (for the following nine months) participants will review their responses to a short questionnaire to check for possible regression or to make contemplative changes and modifications as desired.

**Step Five:** After nine-months of monitoring and self-awareness, the collectively agreed-upon changes will become an entrenched bylaw of "*This is how We do things around here*" way of thinking.

#### **What is a "knowledge worker" and how is his/her productivity determined?**

- *By definition, a knowledge worker has a certain degree of autonomy, which means they are largely responsible for their own management and productivity.*
- *Continuing innovation is part of their work and responsibility.*
- *Knowledge work requires continuous learning.*
- *Productivity is not primarily a matter of quantity but of quality.*
- *Finally, productivity requires that the knowledge worker is both seen and treated as an "asset" rather than a "cost." It requires that knowledge workers want to work for the organization in preference to other opportunities. (1)*

## **2.4 The Program: *29 Days ... to managing information-overload and stress!***

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