Recognizing and Reducing Information Overload

By Leigh Isaacs

As we move farther into an era of enhanced technology and an evolving culture that expects everything (and subsequently everyone) to be "better, faster, smarter," we hear the term "information overload" expressed with more and more frequency. But just what exactly is information overload and what impact does it have on individuals and organizations?

Imagine a day that involves taking in information from: 3 text messages, 100 work and 28 personal e-mail messages, 83 e-group (listserv) messages, 47 Twitter updates, 10 Facebook messages along with hundreds of status updates, the daily newspaper, satellite news radio to and from the office, the evening news with commercials in between and phone calls (cell, home and work) several times a day. Overwhelmed yet? Probably. Yet this is a typical scenario for many, and is a perfect example of information overload.

In his 1970 landmark book, *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler popularized the term "information overload," which refers to the difficulty a person can have understanding an issue and making decisions when he or she is confronted with too much information. Toffler claimed, "When the individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation, or a novelty-loaded context . . . his predictive accuracy plummets. He can no longer make the reasonably correct assessments on which rational behavior is dependent."

Generating More Than We Can Manage

Think about the information sources listed earlier and how they contribute to sensory overload. In many instances, information is coming from duplicative sources. Many have now established separate e-mail accounts for both "personal" and "quasi-personal yet not quite work-related" e-mail. We have e-groups, online subscriptions and RSS feeds. Many professional organizations of which we are members have not only a website, but a Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter presence as well. Using PDAs or smartphones for only voice and e-mail is no longer adequate. Need something at your fingertips? There's an app for that! The Internet is replacing the use of an encyclopedia or other printed media for research. Access to information is easy, fast and overwhelming.

Most of us know that we are subjected to far more information than we could possibly ever process. The Basex report "Information Overload: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us" states, "We have become far more proficient in generating information than we are in managing it, and we have also built technology that creates new information without our intervention." The same study shows that for those working in knowledge environments, approximately 2.1 hours a day is consumed by interruptions. Add interruptions to the deluge of information, and it's amazing that we can complete anything.

It has been said that people can only keep seven items at once in their working memory and that there are limits on the speed with which the brain can process these items. At the point that we are confronted with more than we can process, we experience information overload. Information overload can be managed but it's a skill that takes practice. It's common to mindlessly ingest information, but we are best served when we exercise discretion in what data we digest and how often we seek it out.

> "At the point that we are confronted with more than we can process, we experience information overload."

Considering the Consequences

What are the consequences of not managing our information? From an organizational perspective, studies have shown that information technology has the propensity to diminish workplace efficiency. It is assumed that in order to be successful, one must be adept at multitasking. With today's technology, that often means participating in a conference call, while at the same time checking e-mail, responding to a text message and sending an instant message to a colleague. We have been conditioned to believe that if we somehow fall short of accomplishing several things at once, we are inept or inadequate. However, allowing ourselves to succumb to information overload leads to making mistakes, experiencing difficulty relating details to a bigger issue, wasting time, and needing more time to make a decision.

Reduced efficiencies and information fatigue are just a couple of the effects that can result from exposure to too much information. In our quest for just that right piece of information, we sometimes forget the age old secret of trusting our instincts. We can find ourselves experiencing "paralysis by analysis." Lack of personal interaction is also becoming more and more prevalent as we choose to e-mail our neighbors in the next offices rather than visit them in person.

Not only are we inundated with new information, we can overwhelm ourselves with information we already have. We need to be selective in what we choose to keep,

to prevent spending exorbitant amounts of time wading through stockpiles of needless data. We have become a 24-7 instant gratification society. Employers demand it. Personal relationships expect it. If we do not apply our own filters and establish certain boundaries, we are destined to end up like the hamster on the wheel, constantly scurrying to keep up yet never arriving at a destination.

Taking Steps to Manage Information Overload

What can we do to stay one step ahead of information overload? It's not an easy feat, and no one solution works for everyone. A few tips to consider:

• **Organize your time.**
Set aside time for e-mail and phone calls. Keep meetings focused. Your calendar is full of meetings and "to do's." Set aside time for planning and actually getting work done, or for down time, to step aside, clear your head and focus.

• **Organize your information.**
The same technology that can overwhelm can also be your ally. Consolidate, file and organize your information where possible, and make a conscious choice to keep only what you need. Many of us have a tendency to "over save" resulting in challenges when trying to find information later. Set up rules in your e-mail folders. If you subscribe to an e-group or receive regular online periodicals, have them automatically routed to a separate folder upon delivery so you aren't distracted each time one arrives.

• **Be selective about the information you choose to receive.**
Consider whether you really need to be on 12 e-groups or 53 LinkedIn groups.

• **Know your focus and your passion and don't be distracted by those things that don't add value or interest.**
Keep only those things that you find enriching, both personally and professionally.

• **Unplug when necessary; keep your status message up to date to manage the expectations of others.**
We are expected to perform and respond on command. While there are some situations that are bona fide emergencies, the majority are not.

• **If you are in a meeting and need to focus, turn your mobile phone off. Use voicemail.**
Take advantage of caller ID to answer calls that you need to take right away and defer those that you don't.

• **Make a genuine attempt to keep work and home separate.**

Technology promotes the blurring of these lines, but remember that no matter your profession, you are entitled to have "off" time.

• **If you are a social networker, choose a primary network rather than participating in several.**
Set limits on your networking time. It's easy to log onto Facebook to do a quick scan of updates and then discover that several hours have passed.

• **Be in tune with what stresses you.**
If the ding of an incoming instant message is distracting, turn it off or exit IM entirely. If you can't resist picking up your BlackBerry every time the light flashes, put it somewhere where you can't see it.

Make a conscious decision about the effectiveness and desirability of each bit of information and methods of improvement. Ultimately, it will result in obtaining the best information in the best way. Given that we are information professionals, we are in a prime position to understand its effects and lead by example for managing this onslaught of information.

Is all of this information a blessing or a curse? The answer lies within one's ability to recognize limits and establish boundaries. Equipped with the right tools and the right motivation, we can take advantage of all the wonders the Information Age brings, but still maintain some balance and peace of mind. **ILTA**

Leigh Isaacs is the Firmwide Records Manager for Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP. She has over 10 years of information management experience and over 25 years of experience in the legal field. Leigh's expertise includes deployment of enterprise programs, development of information management and related policies and procedures, creation of retention schedules, on and off-site storage considerations including outsourcing, process improvements, evaluation and implementation of technology solutions and the disposition of information for dissolved entities. She is a published author and speaker on issues relating to information management. Leigh can be reached at lisaacs@orrick.com.