

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

VOL. LXII, No. 16

\$2.25 per copy

JUNE 1, 1996

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Vital Speeches of the Day

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VOL. LXII

JUNE 1, 1996

No. 16

The Shortcomings Of The Information Age

HANDLING INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Address by JEFF DAVIDSON, MBA, CMC, *Executive Director, Breathing Space Institute of Chapel Hill*

Delivered to the National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland, December 8, 1995

Information overload is a pervasive problem for career professionals today, and chances are that you are besieged by all kinds of information competing for your time and attention. Is this merely a lucky guess? Given the way our society is progressing, everyone who holds a position of responsibility is, almost by definition, besieged by too much competing for their time and attention. Each of us, on a daily basis, faces more information than any generation in history. What is the origin of this information buildup? Was it predictable? Can we look to the past to see the reasons why there's so much information today? It turns out that we can.

There have been three great ages of humankind, with a fourth about to emerge. The first was the age of hunting and gathering, wherein people principally lived by hunting animals and collecting berries. The age of agriculture followed, when people learned that they didn't have to be nomads, wandering around to find their next meal. Instead, they could cultivate the soil, predict when crops would grow, and forecast what their yield would be. This was a great leap forward for humankind; it allowed for an understanding of how to work with nature and the seasons. The next great age was the age of industry, in which all manner of capital were put together so that consumers, as a class, would be served by producers, who learned countless ways to turn out products through mass production capabilities.

The next age that will emerge — but is not here yet — is the information age. Many people make the mistake of believing that we're in the information age already. But in the information age, information will serve us, and we will not be abused by an excess of information. I refer to the present, pre-information age era in which we now reside the era of over-information, an idea I'm sure you can readily relate to. We all face more information than we need to proceed with our careers and our lives.

The Shortcomings of the Information Age

To greater understand how we are besieged with information, consider this. In the industrial age, when people need to achieve something, do they have to go through a series of motions, read manuals, or become experts at the task? Not at all; they flip a switch (or clap their hands, jiggle their keys, or some other simple task). It isn't necessary to know a single thing about lighting; all one needs to do is flip a switch to turn the light on. Lighting is a product of the industrial age, and lights serve you — to get them on, you only flip a switch. To start the car, you need only turn the key. To take care of a number of other tasks, you push a button, flip a switch, or turn a dial. That is the age of industry working at its best, so that you don't have to become an electrical engineer or physicist to function effectively.

Let's take the same concept about what it takes to function effectively in the age of industry, and apply it to information. To get the information you need, what do you need to do? Do you need to go on-line or open a manual? Unfortunately, most of us right now — particularly in the workplace — end up going through a series of activities in order to get the precise information we need. Very often, the problem is not a lack of information on a topic. Frequently, the problem we face is an abundance of information, or too much information of a general nature. In the age of information, this won't be as much of a challenge. You will be able to turn on a computer, come up with the specific question you have, and it will do the work for you.

The age of information is coming, but before it arrives, there will be a great deal of pain and gnashing of teeth. This generation is more besieged by information than any that preceded it, and perhaps more so than all previous generations combined. We have more things competing for our time and attention than any group in history.

For example, last year the Smithsonian Institution in Washington added nearly one million new items to their collection — despite the fact that they've been in existence for 145 years. They'll probably have 1.1 million next year. The era of over-information uniformly affects us all, institutions included. What we have failed to learn is how to let go of the things that aren't so important to retain. We seem to be in a state of megalomania, grabbing every bit of information we have and surrendering almost nothing.

Take the English language as another example. With more words in it than almost any other language on earth, English has grown by 65,000 to 70,000 words since the mid-1960s. If you were adept at speaking English in the 1960s, but fell into a coma and woke up in the 1990s, you would have a host of new terms to learn. These aren't just medical, legal, or scientific terms, but words in everyday language. The growth of words in the English languages in the last several decades is half the number of words in some entire language in the world!

All around us, more information is the norm. In researching for my book *Breathing Space*, I was aghast at the amount of information we're all exposed to. Once you understand the amount of information that impacts career professionals, you begin to understand how important it is to become more selective than you've ever been.

Several million pages are used to print the documents for the trials, heats, and finals for the winter and summer olympics. These documents are generated just to keep up with the results. But in 1896 in Greece, or in ancient Sparta and Athens, they didn't need millions of pages of documents. Consider also that last year, Congress received several hundred million pieces of mail, up from 15 million in 1970. With the passing of only one generation, the Congress of the United States now receives 30 to 40 times the amount of mail it received before. Is it any wonder that the people we elect are not as effective as they could be? They are absolutely inundated by the amount of information they encounter. Anyone who is inundated with information will not be as effective as they would be if they had a few thin files of potent information designed specifically for the task at hand. Instead, there are more than 55 million computer printers in the United States alone, spewing out billions of reams of paper a year. Where is the paperless office?

To understand how much information you're being hit by, consider that in the Sorbonne library in Paris in 1302, you could spend eight or ten years studying the 900 to 1,000 volumes that represented the vast accumulation of knowledge in the Western world. Afterwards, you could leave and be among the top 100 most learned people on the planet. Today, however, just to keep up with new legislation, breakthroughs, what competitors are doing, shifts in the marketplace, or new technology would be a full job in itself. Never mind undertaking the job for which you were hired, managing your staff, or meeting quota — just to keep up with everything that had impact in your industry or profession, it would take all your waking hours and then some. This is the case in every industry and profession in America. The amount of information we're all exposed to is exponential. The point? You can't keep up, and hereafter, you shouldn't take it as something personal.

Information Overkill

It is a socially and culturally pervasive phenomenon for people to wake up feeling they are deficient as time managers, supervisors, or information managers. Yet, everyone feels the same way, because everyone is being hit with more data than

anyone can fathom. Today, there are at least 2,000 books published worldwide. At least 700 are published in your profession every week. Thousands of new magazines are launched every year in the United States. All told, more information is generated in a 24-hour period than you could take in for the rest of your life. And as more people go on-line and add information to the Internet, we will rapidly approach a situation in which more information is generated on earth in one hour than you could take in for the rest of your life. What do we do about it? First, we don't worry about it. Second, we get more selective than ever about what we take in. Third, we decide what information is truly important to us. Where do we want to be in the future? We can't stay on top of everything, but we can determine in advance where we want to be.

The massive overkill in information that we all face is sometimes amusing, and sometimes scary. Here's an example. Typical White House press coverage is 1,800 reporters a day. Couldn't 300 or 400 people do the job? The 1,800 we have is massive overkill. The President himself receives 40,000 letters a day. Imagine all those people writing those letters, all those stamps, all that stationery, and all the time spent delivering it — all to the wrong place, because the White House can't handle those letters. There are correlations in industry, also. All of this is information adding to the massive glut of information we can't deal with.

Another example of massive overkill is the "who killed JFK" industry. In his 1993 book, *Case Closed*, Gerald Posner walks through every detail and shows conclusively why it was definitely Lee Harvey Oswald who fired the gun, and how the "magic bullets" indeed did take the angles they were supposed to. Additional mythology or conspiracy theories about who killed John F. Kennedy will only add to the glut of information we can't use, information which serves no one. Yet, it is a \$200 million industry that is constantly fed by more authors, books, kiosks, tours, and so on.

Cancer research and treatment also suffer from massive overkill. There are more people involved in the research and treatment of cancer than there are actual victims. In other words, cancer victims could each have a personal representative in government or private research and development. So much is being published, but unfortunately, there seem to be few real breakthroughs. There's massive overkill in the amount of administration, paper, and reports, but the results we're looking for are often not there.

Think about the tax considerations just to employ a nanny in your household. Overkill afflicts us whether we're filling out our taxes, buying property, selling property — try to fire someone today. Everywhere we turn, there's more information, more forms, more red tape, and more involvement. It is not your fault that you were born in this society at this time; you're a product of this culture. It is my hope that when you understand that information overkill is affecting all of us, you will become more selective than you've ever been.

Do We Know More or Less Today?

I assume that you're a fairly sophisticated person, certainly more knowledgeable than people of previous generations. I have a hypothesis, however, that despite all that you know, when you consider this knowledge as a percentage of all there is to be known, you actually know less than previous generations did. People in previous generations had less to know; thus, they had an inherent advantage. For instance, do you know when the Challenger shuttle blew up? Without asking

anyone else or consulting any sources, could you say? The answer is 1986. What if I asked you when Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in the Soviet Union? Again, don't consult anything other than your own knowledge. Do you know? I've asked this question in rooms of up to 400 people, and I hear answers all over the board. The answer is 1985. When did the first gas lines begin to form in the United States as a result of the OPEC oil embargo? You may remember it — you probably lived through it — it was 1973.

Why is it that events of the last 20 to 25 years ago are hard to recall? Because everything has gone by like one big blur. When there are a lot of things competing for your time and attention, it's hard to keep things in context. I routinely give quizzes when I give presentations to groups, and I find that it's often easier to pick out dates in the distant past than it is to recall what happened in the last 20 to 25 years. Most people know that the Vikings landed in Newfoundland around 1000 — 1002, to be exact. What about the Norman invasion of England? Every time I ask for this date, somebody says 1066. They know that better than they know what happened in the last 20 to 25 years, in terms of naming the actual year. When was the Magna Carta signed? Often, many people know the answer: 1215. When did the pilgrims land on Plymouth Rock? 1620. The adoption of the Constitution? 1783. In addition, most people know that the Bolshevik revolution began in 1917; that Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs in 1927; and that the stock market crashed in 1929 — perhaps they even know the exact date, October 28.

When you're hit by too much information, it goes by in one big blur. As sophisticated and knowledgeable as you are about information, how well would you do on a quiz of your cultural knowledge? For instance, what's the population of Indonesia? It's approaching 200 million; it'll soon take over the United States, and it's no bigger than California. What about Mexico, our neighbor to the south? Its population is 92 million. Pakistan? 122 million.

Do you know the principal languages of foreign countries? Did you know that Cambodia's principal language is Khmer? Or that Belgium's principal language is Flemish? What about Portuguese in Brazil, or Persian in Iran? The people of these countries share the planet with us, but most of us have no idea what language they speak.

See if you can tell what the following items have in common: Surabaya, Port Alegre, Harbin, Pune, Changdu, Huan, Yangdong, Tiago, Tashkent, and Kanpur? What do they have in common? They are all cities of several million people. Have you heard of any of them? They probably exceed the population of your city.

Here are some more examples. See if you can tell which is bigger, in terms of land size. Is Texas bigger than Spain? If you said yes, you're right. What about France? Again, Texas is bigger. How about Mozambique and Texas? Mozambique is bigger. Is China or the continental United States bigger? The answer is China, as you may have guessed — but would you have guessed that China is still bigger than the United States, with Alaska and Hawaii included? How about Alaska and India — which is bigger? India is bigger. California or Japan? California is larger.

What Information Do We Need?

The point is that more information means that we'll know less of the available information that's out there. But there's no need to worry, because all of us are in the same boat.

What this also tells us is that we have to be much more discriminating about our attention to news, information, and entertainment. We also need to redefine what is news. "News" is a derivative of "new." Here are some items that I don't consider to be news. It may anger you initially, but I'll soon explain why I believe this.

Ethnic clashes that have been going on for thousands of years aren't news — there would have to be a breakthrough in order for them to be news. Ancient hostilities, the death of communism, political corruption, government blundering — not news unless there's a different nature to them. Unsubstantiated allegations against politicians or celebrities aren't news. Last night's fire, inner-city crime, and the plight of the homeless are all undesirable situations, but they're not news. When every TV station gives us this same information night after night, they ignore the breakthroughs in human potential and the fact that most people went to bed happy last night. This convolutes our view of society; we're deluged with news that says that things aren't going so well. Certainly, we have problems, but this constant barrage of what's going wrong is going to shape perceptions.

There's no need to take in information because you feel you ought to, or you must. There is no body of information anymore that everyone can be counted on to know. You may think, for example, that everyone should know the dates of the Civil War in the United States (1861 to 1865). But if someone just came to this country within the last decade, and they've been learning English and learning the culture, they may not know the dates of the Civil War, and it may not have as much importance to them. We can't count on anybody having any particular body of knowledge that everyone else has. If you're a manager or supervisor, that immediately tells you that your goal in explaining things to people is a greater challenge today than it was to your counterpart of years ago. You can't make assumptions that managers could make years ago.

Often, we don't even realize when we've crossed the line in terms of news and information intake. A lot of people listen to the "shock jocks" in the morning on the way to work, with the justification that times are tough, and they could use a chuckle. What they don't understand, however, is that every bit of information they take in has impact. This impact is ultimately cumulative, and the quality of your life will ultimately be influenced by the kinds of information they take in. If you listen to people who make millions of dollars by deriding society, telling off-color jokes, using foul language, or telling tales that are unsubstantiated, then it tells us a lot about you. Yet, these shock jocks are multi-million dollar industries, because people continue to support that kind of information intake.

Reducing Our Information Intake

Now, when we consider the major form of information intake in our society — despite the presence of the Internet in virtually all organizations today and in many homes; and despite the fact that much of the information we get is by television or radio — paper still seems to predominate as the major mode of information dissemination. It's curious that that would be the case this late in the 1990s. There are two basic reasons why paper is still king. In the United States, we have the lowest postal rates in the world. We also have the greatest capacity for paper generation — more laser printers, more fax machines, more personal copiers, and more computers than any nation on earth, per capita. We publish, print, make backup copies, cc: people, and spend all kinds of time documenting our trails.

Having the lowest postal rates has spawned a huge direct mail industry. Your name is on hundreds, if not thousands, of lists. Every time you do anything whereby your name can get on a list, it does get placed on a list. In many states, when you register your vehicle, your name gets sold, placed on giant computerized mailing lists, and soon you start to receive countless advertisements and offers in support of your vehicle. If you order by fax, pay by credit card, or participate in any transaction where your name and address are given, chances are that you'll be placed on someone else's list. I routinely ask that my name be kept off of any mailing lists whenever I make a transaction. That alone cuts down on a lot of the paper and information you're subject to that you don't even need to be seeing.

One of the things we should realize in order to understand why our offices are glutted with paper and information is that we have a predisposition in our society to photocopy. Our credo has almost become, "I photocopy (or fax); therefore, I am." Sometimes it's important to leave a paper trail or to have meticulous files. But this predisposition carries over to copying recipes, Little League schedules — you name it. Soon we have copies upon copies, and that in itself wouldn't be so bad, if not for the fact that we don't have the habit of paring down, so that we have less to deal with. I used to work with someone at the start of the 1980s, when PCs began to populate everyone's desks, who would keep first drafts, second drafts, and modifications of every document he had typed by the office pool. It doesn't take much of an imagination to realize that in a very short time, he started to fill his filing cabinets, and he didn't have much space. He was deluged by information which, for the most part, didn't serve him; in many instances, all he needed to do was keep the final draft; yet, he had a predisposition to hang on to everything.

I also have a friend who, believe it or not, cannot bear to throw away sports pages he hasn't read yet. If he hasn't read a particular sports page, he puts it aside in a stack. Once, when he went on vacation in Europe for two weeks, he had his papers kept for him. He couldn't read the sports pages right away when he got back, so he put them aside. To this day, he now has a stack of paper about a foot high that he's accumulated. He has not read sports pages from several weeks — and in some cases, months — back. He fully intends to keep them, and the pile keeps growing. Why doesn't he just toss the whole pile, read tomorrow's page, and begin anew? He can linger over it and savor it. I told my friend to look at the compilations, with all the players' records for the season to date. He may not see every score box, but he can see the aggregate.

I know a man named John who believes that because mail is addressed to him, he must read it. He carefully opens every piece of mail that comes across his desk, I told him, "John, don't you understand? It's third-class mail. Your name gets on a list, gets transferred to another list — it wasn't even from a person!" Just because something is addressed to you, it doesn't mean it has anything to do with you at all. Some of you may argue that you learn things from junk mail; it may be interesting to see what's offered; you might learn about a competitor. True, there is some marginal value, but with all the information that comes your way, why hang on to marginal information which may be of value, but generally is not? Why over-subscribe to publications, when one or two key publications would do the job? Why do you need to get a daily newspaper, unless you choose to get it, and it's of interest and value to you?

I'm not knocking any vehicle of information you're cur-

rently using. If it provides benefit, either personally or professionally, then by all means, continue to do so. But if you receive it because you think you should, you ought to, you must — then please, get off the list. You will not miss the data. In a society where information flows in abundance, you won't miss the big report, the breakthrough story, or the important happening. You only need to be awake and alert, and information will flow in your direction.

It took me years to overcome the habit of reading the paper from cover to cover every Sunday. My mother would do it, reading a little in the morning, some in the afternoon, and some in the evening. I did the same, and then began to realize that I'd rather be doing something else — going out hiking, perhaps. It took me years to overcome my father's predisposition to read; he used to read three or four books a week. Today, I'd rather have the key pages from books that I need, and perhaps put them on my computer. I don't need to keep the physical book or report; I want the essence, the part I can use.

Many people believe that it's necessary to have everything they're hanging on to. You really don't, though. After you've completed your income taxes, for instance, after three years, you only need to keep the totals — the forms themselves, some key documents, and so forth. Generally speaking — unless the IRS will come after you for other prior problems — most people can let go of most of the receipts and paperwork they're holding on to for three years prior to the year they've just filed. For example, if you're filing your 1996 taxes, you'll want to hold on to 1995's, 1994's, and perhaps 1993's taxes, but for 1992 and earlier, you only need the totals. That alone will enable you to pare down a lot of what you've been holding on to.

I've also found that tax time is a wonderful opportunity to engage in some review of what you were doing two or three years ago. When you go through your checkbook and the logs of what you've spent money on again, you begin to see how much of it has little impact on your life today. A lot of what you were doing, you'll find, doesn't support where you are now. That can help you be more discerning today about what you decide to bring into your life in terms of information, paper, documentation, and so on.

We've gotten to the point in our society that there's so much information that often, we don't even understand how we're being hit by it. You may have a teenager in your house that's enamored of carrying messages on his or her clothing, perhaps you even do so yourself. It's gotten to the point that we have so many messages on clothes that I expect that any day, we'll find people wearing shirts that read, "this space for rent." Twenty or thirty years ago, people would have cringed at the thought of people putting advertisements or the name of a designer on clothes. Now, it seems that everyone has to have a message for everything. When you encounter people with messages on their clothes, look at the cumulative impact. You're in a world when you're hit with messages all day long. I took a cruise recently, and you'd think it would be a haven from paper and information. But because I speak on this topic, and it's of personal interest to me, I collected every piece of paper placed under the door or in the staterooms of the passengers. In one week, I collected 47 pieces of paper. I was aghast. Was this really a vacation?

When you're in a society where information flows in abundance, when paper comes to you without you asking for it, then it makes no sense to proceed as if it won't happen in the future. What you need to do is make a fundamental shift in

your orientation — in how you approach your day, your work, your week, your year, your life, and your career. From now to the end of your career, you should be more vigilant about what information you take in, and who you allow to influence you. You should be more selective about the news and entertainment programs you watch. No one from previous generations is likely to be able to help you. Your parents, for instance, are experiencing the same thing. But you, in the prime of your career, are more likely to be besieged by information than others around you. There aren't too many books or speakers that discuss this all-pervasive phenomenon.

Excess Information Reduces Breathing Space

Here's what happens when you're besieged by information on a continual basis. You begin to feel overwhelmed, which leads to the feeling of over-work. You could probably handle the tough challenges that are thrown at you. With down-sizing, foreign competition, and shrinking core staffs, you're facing more challenges today than in previous years, and greater challenges than your counterparts of previous generations. Even with those challenges, and with all the changes going on in your organization, much of it wouldn't exist without the onslaught of information, much of it not necessary to your health or well-being. If you're able to eliminate a lot of the extraneous information that makes it way to you, you will actually experience being overwhelmed less frequently, and you will not feel as over-worked. I am off of mailing lists and have dropped most of my subscriptions. I don't pay any attention, whenever I can, to any extraneous information,

It's important to understand that you control the spaces in your life. If your desk is a mess right now, strewn high with piles that are growing higher, you need to understand that you're the one that controls that space. The same principle applies to your filing cabinet, your shelves, the top of your dining room table, your kitchen counter, your glove compartment, or your back seat. You are the one controlling your space, and this acknowledgment will allow you to stay in control of your information.

A major principle to understand is that it's harmful to ingest too much information at once. Think about this analogy. You're out on a desert isle, and all the water around you is salty. Fortunately, you find a barrel, and it begins to rain. You can drink the rain water, and you're so thirsty that you lift up the bucket and take a drink. But because you're trying to take in too much water at once, it will not be an enjoyable experience. Suppose, however, that you have a cup that you can slowly dip into the barrel and drink at your own pace. This is exactly what you should do with information. Any time you notice that too much information is coming your way in a short period of time, look at the situation and consider the importance of slowing down. If you don't, you're likely to find yourself overwhelmed, over-worked, and feeling out of control.

When you have new equipment or technology, it's far more important to slow down, follow the basics, read the rules, and become comfortable with the new techniques. Get the procedures down, make some lists, and pin up some things if you need to. You're far better off slowing down to accommodate changes, so that later, when you become proficient, you're back up to speed and can zoom ahead because, after all, you have a new way of doing things that's more efficient and effective than what you were doing before. Far too often in our society, especially when it comes to ingesting new information in the form of instructions, encounter people who shortchange the

process and end up having a harder time, and spend more time getting things right.

If you're facing volumes of information, divide and conquer. You may be facing a ten inch pile of information. Put it into file folders, and group like items together. Eliminate duplicates and prioritize the important items in a given file. Some of you may be familiar with Woody Allen's expression, "Showing up is 85 percent of everything." I say that at least half the job of dealing with most information is simply dividing it into piles, categorizing, or putting it into various directories on your hard drive. The same principles apply to your filing cabinet, your shelves, and so forth. When it comes to handling new information, we should revert to the basics. Babies start with simple food, for instance; later, when they get teeth, can chew and eat more complex foods. The same applies to taking in new information. It's understandable in a world that demands a lot from you, but when it comes to taking in instructions, it's not often the best thing to do.

Whenever you're integrating new technology or learning something new, it's best to follow directions, take a step at a time, determine if you're on the right path, measure your progress, practice, and finally develop a new routine, when it becomes automatic. Having breathing space entails employing basics, so that things can become automatic for you.

Filing as a Method of Managing Information

One of the most important things in terms of dealing with excessive information is the high art of filing. A lot of people see it as un-glamorous and mundane. Yet, look at it from a greater perspective. Why would you ever file anything? It may have future value, it may have to be filed to protect against future consequences. You file things because they're things you want to be able to withdraw again easily. If there's no need to withdraw them again easily, then they don't need to be filed. They could go into a stack in the corner or be thrown out. We file to make it easier on ourselves. Filing only takes a few simple tools and the right mindset. When you're able to retrieve the things you've filed, you're powerful. Having something and not being able to find it is the same as not having it.

Filing can involve physical files — file drawers, for instance — or a hard disk. The principles stay the same, however. When filing hard copy materials, the essential tools are a chair, a wastebasket, file folders, a filing cabinet, some labels, and perhaps a stapler, paper clips, and so on. Before you start with a pile, go through it rapidly and determine what can be thrown out or recycled. Get rid of what you don't need, so you're only dealing with what's necessary. Then, group all like items together. Throw out what seems similar to something else you've chosen to retain. With what's left, ask yourself if you can consolidate the number of physical sheets by using the back sides of documents, perhaps using your copier. If you do this routinely, then your entire filing cabinet will have half the physical number of sheets. Even if you only do it occasionally, you can keep a lot of space clear for yourself. And when you group like items in the same place, it's much easier to deal with the information.

I routinely create dossiers of information. If you have business cards, addresses, or other small items that you want to hang onto, lay them down on the copier and create a single page. They're much easier to manage when they're on a page. Can many of these pages be grouped together? If so, it's much easier to find someone you met at a convention or meeting if you know that it's on a sheet with the cards of everyone else

you meet there. It's not necessary to date every item you file. Something that's been in your files for a long time could be of great value. If date-stamping sounds like a good idea to you, though, then do it.

When filing materials, it's better to have ten files that are thick than 100 files with only two or three pages each. Suppose you get a call or someone comes into the office, and you have to pull a file to answer their question. If you only have ten files, the odds of you being able to immediately go to the correct large file are very high. It may take 30 seconds or a minute to flip through the 50 or 100 pages in the file. But what about flipping through 100 files with only three or four pages each? If you took out your stopwatch and tried this, you'd find that fewer files with more items in them is the best route to take. Use color-coding freely within large files, or move the more important elements to the front of the file. Multi-colored files and labels help, also. Think about your doctor's or dentist's office. They usually have color-coded standing files. Products from the office supply stores will allow you to create a similarly efficient filing system. If you don't know where to put a particular item but want to hang onto it, you can create a file called "Where do I file this?" I use a file called "Check in one month." Other handy names could be "Read or chuck," or "Read after the merger goes through."

It's not necessary to read everything as it comes in. It's perfectly OK to set things aside in a drawer and read them later. The only problem, however, is leaning on that drawer too much. Visit that drawer often, so that you don't end up with a six- or eight-inch pile of paper. Thereafter, make a decision about whether to throw out, recycle, or file the items there. One of the beneficial aspects of using such a drawer is that revisiting materials weeks after you've seen them for the first time makes it much easier to throw out items. An issue may have already been resolved by now, for instance.

A key question when evaluating any item to be filed is, "Where does this go?" The answer is finding an appropriate file where you can find the material easily. You may find that you need to relabel files, but that's OK. This is your system, designed for you — never mind what it looks like to others. Re-labeling files is an indication that you're getting good at filing. Even students or your spouse at home could benefit from more effective filing.

It's also worth considering the benefits of having a file folder for each month of the year and a file folder for each day of the month. This idea, the "tickler file," has been in practice in the United States for years. Create a file for days 1-31 of the month, and place it at the front of one of your file drawers. Behind that, have a file for each month of the year. For example, if it's the second day of the month, but you receive something you won't need until the 15th, then put it in the file for, say, the 13th (to allow yourself some slack). If anything comes in that you don't need now, put it in your tickler file. This yields some immediate benefits. It keeps your desk clear and eliminates a lot of worry about where things go. As the days and months go by, you continuously take files that were in front and put them in the back. Once you get this system in place, you'll find that many of the things you file may not need to be acted on later. The benefits of this system are immediate; if you follow nothing else in this article, this system alone will benefit you.

More Efficient Correspondence

What about the physical correspondence that you receive?

Much of the correspondence we'd like to address falls by the wayside. When a response doesn't require your formal business letterhead or protocol, there are a number of things you can do to speed up your ability to respond to someone. Many organizations have developed a pre-printed message that says, "Excuse our informality, but we feel it's more important to respond promptly than to offer a more formal reply that would take weeks." I'm pleased when I get one of these; I think it's a group that understands that it's more important to respond to me than to be formal.

Very often, you can retain the return address of those who send you mail. You can clip that address and use it as a label to write back to the party. You can also use the actual document itself, and write your message at the bottom. That gives a person a running log of what they asked of you, as well as gives them your response. Use this system for those things that don't realize formal business protocol; certainly, it's not always an option.

You may want to get a rubber stamp that says "speed reply." Often, your reply can be written at the bottom of the letter. Ultimately, you get it off your desk and can move on to what's next. Almost inevitably, a lack of response to your correspondence doesn't mean that your request isn't important, doesn't merit a response, that the person doesn't like you, or any other reason you might come up with. It often means that the person doesn't have a system of easily handling correspondence. Their systems are glutted. They're overwhelmed with too much information competing for their time and attention. By handling correspondence quickly yourself, you'll find that you're training others to do the same. Often, I'll enclose an adhesive label in my correspondence for others to use when they write back to me.

When people send a fax, they often kill an entire page with a cover page. You can use a label-sized attachment and place it on the correspondence itself. This cuts down on paper, time, and long distance charges. There's no need for grand announcements. When replying to longer correspondence, feel free to use the back side of their letter, or draw arrows and write comments in the margin. Certainly, there are many times that you can't do this, but when you can, use that opportunity. Don't let correspondence build up.

As a general principle, whenever you let a stack of paper build up, you can't manage it as effectively as you can when you put those pages in file folders, or in baskets with the tabs sticking out so you can read them. Human beings generally don't do well with piles that are stacked high, with no way to negotiate the space. Vertical piles don't work for human beings. The most repetitive task you face, even in the age of the Internet, is handling paper. Your goal is to be in control of the paper that comes your way by getting off of extraneous mailing lists, using pre-printed forms, using form letters when they'll do the job.

Paring Down Your Information Intake

Look at your system and determine how you can pare down. I suggest opening your mail over the waste basket; it's much easier to throw things out with the waste basket below you. If you get a magazine or journal, go through it rapidly and take out the articles or items that look like they'll be of interest. Recycle the rest of the publication. Often, there's no need to hang on to the back issues of a publication. These days, much of the information is also on-line. Pare down what you get to only what you need — get the volume of it down as quickly and easily as possible. Again, see if you can use the copier to

create a single sheet.

The same applies to books. I get books from people all the time. I quickly scan the entire book. I'll read the table of contents and index, and find the pages in that book that contain information that's of value to me. Then, I'll make a photocopy of those pages, along with the cover and publishing information, and create a dossier of the key information from that book that's important to me. I then give away that book to an associate, a friend, a library — wherever, I don't need to keep the physical hard copy. Thirty or forty books takes up an entire shelf, a dossier of these books is, at most, two inches thick. Often, I don't even keep the dossier; I'll dictate the key points and have a typist transcribe the tape. I have hundreds of books reviewed on my hard disk and can find them easily. There's no accumulation, no pile. With the word search ability of word processing software, I can find the information I need immediately. From an information standpoint, everything in front of me is clear. I could walk through your office and find dozens of voluminous reports that you've barely cracked, if ever, since you've placed them in their permanent home. Go through these documents and start to pare down.

Hereafter, whenever an item passes your desk, there are some key questions you can ask yourself. What is the issue behind this document? In other words, what are you saving it for? Do you need it, or do you fear that if you don't have it, you'll somehow be deficient? Does it support what you already know, or what you already believe? Is it just an information crutch you want to walk around on? In this era, when information flows in abundance, we generally don't need to hang on to the things we hang onto, because it's quickly superseded anyway. Something else will come along.

Another question: Should I have received this at all? Were you the right party in your department to receive this item? And does it represent information of marginal value that you could easily skip, and in retrospect, there will be no dent in your career for not retaining it? If so, then let it go! Can you delegate the information in the document? Will it matter if you don't handle it at all? Can you file it as something to review next month? Most of what crosses your desk doesn't need to linger; it can go somewhere else. When you're in control of your information, you can retrieve it more easily and put it to use. Information is power, but if you can't find what you've retained, it's of no value. It's only of value when you can find it and can put it together with other things.

Think about the advantages of eliminating just one form. In organizations today, we introduce forms so we'll have more control. Once a form is introduced, however, it never seems to be eliminated. Do IRS forms ever get easier? In organizations I've been in, the number of things employees have had to submit which represent mundane information has been increasing. Eliminating forms means less paper, ordering, costs, receiving, handling, storing, printing, electricity use, toner and cartridge costs, employee time, and so on. Think of all the benefits that accrue to the people who don't have to deal with that form, too.

Making Decisions With Less Information

Let's focus on something that will also greatly enhance your ability to manage information: decision-making. Too often today, executives are paralyzed by too much information. They fall into the old trap of the paralysis of analysis. Colin Powell, in a Time interview, said that if zero represents no data, and 100 represents all the data needed to make a decision, he usu-

ally waits until he's at about 60, then he uses gut instinct, intuition, and personal experience to make the choice. Waiting may mean losing the opportunity, or it might be too late. More data is not always the answer, because you may get enough data to lead you to path A, but waiting for more may cause you to take path B — more data can lead to all paths. A lot of data is redundant, or confirms what we already know or believe. We tend to seek out that which confirms our preconceptions. A lot of data might represent a worst-case scenario. Thus collecting more data is western, analytical, and corporate, but much of the time, we can get by on less data. Collecting more data may be a substitute for action, also. In all cases, the information you collect has to be applied, so data itself has little value unless it's acted on.

In America today, you are three or four calls away from any expert — a librarian, an industry expert, an editor of a key publication, and so on — and if they don't have the answer, they'll probably know who does. Often, you can find a trailblazer or someone who's already gone down the path you're considering. If you need to make a purchase decision, for instance, there is somebody else, somewhere else, who's gone down the same or a similar path, who can give you pointers that will save reams of data collection. You might also consensus-build among your team, your staff, or department to yield an answer. Simply brainstorming your way through a problem can yield a variety of potential solutions, also. Certainly, you can't apply these tactics to every situation; sometimes, reams of data are totally appropriate. But there are many more times than we care to admit when something simpler — even a majority-rules vote — will do the job. Last, will the answer simply emerge? Often, it does, if you give it a little more time.

What about making decisions with no data whatsoever? Sometimes you'll have to follow your own intuitions. If you're 40 years old and make a decision based on your gut feelings, are you merely making an arbitrary choice? Certainly not; you're making a decision based on a cellular intelligence. Every cell in your body, every gram of your being is brought into a decision based on instinct. There's a lot more behind these decisions than you give yourself credit for. All 40 years of your experience are behind that decision. In the short term, you can collect data while having made an intuitive choice to begin with. Look at the results of your choice, then go back and see how right your intuitive decision was. When you've done this enough, then maybe you'll start to feel comfortable about using just the intuitive process when that's all you have.

In this society, we as executives and responsible officials should recognize that continually, we need to pare down and let go of the paper and volumes of data we're collecting. Prune your files or your hard disk. Doubling your hard disk capacity is seldom the answer; what's important is being able to focus on having the mental and emotional strength to let go of information that's of marginal value. What are the best times to pare down? Near your birthday — especially when you're 30, 40, 50, or another zero-year birthday; when the year's about to change; when spring cleaning comes; when fall is approaching; when you re-locate or merge; when you're promoted — any milestone is a good time to pare down. The best time to pare down, however, is any time when you're in the frame of mind where you recognize that paring down, in itself, is a worthwhile activity, and that paring down is an adaptive behavior that helps you in your career and your personal life.

Every day, for the rest of your life, you are likely to be be-

sieged by more information, not less. There are software and technology that allow us to have our own personalized front page, which sifts through all the information available and gives us exactly what we seek, but because of what's going on in society — people introducing new products and services; the new options available to us; the varied interests we have, and so on — it's guaranteed that there will be more information available to us in time. There will be more channels on the TV, more publications, more on the Internet, and not less. I say this

not out of pessimism, but simply because when we understand what we're up against, we're in a far better position to take control of it. We are the pioneer generation, moving into a rapidly changing future, and are besieged by more information than any generation in history. But the good news is that we can handle it. We have the intelligence, the capability, and the tools. Thus far, we haven't acknowledged the reality of what we're up against and drawn upon the resources and tools that we have at our command.

Managing A Creative Organization

NEVER BEING AFRAID TO FAIL

Address by MICHAEL EISNER, *CEO and Chairman of the Walt Disney Company*
Delivered to the Executives Club of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, April 19, 1996

Thank you ... and good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I am deeply honored to be selected International Executive of the Year by the Executives Club of Chicago.

To be cited as an outstanding international executive in a town where companies like McDonald's and Motorola wrote the book on international trade is a tribute that is truly humbling.

Humbling is something at Disney we encourage.

It reminds me of an experience one of our young American Disney executives had when he was opening a new office for us in London and wanted to impress his new British secretary. As she entered his office, he was speaking on the telephone and said, "Why, of course, your majesty, think nothing of it. You can call me any time. See you soon. Regards to Prince Philip."

Then he hung up and said, "Oh, hello, Miss Brown. Did you want to see me?"

"I just wanted to tell you, sir," says the secretary, "that the men are here to hook up your telephone."

As a native New Yorker, I am well aware of the spirited competition between our cities and I can't help but admire Chicago for many reasons. For its exuberance ... for its friendliness ... for its dynamic "can do" attitude.

On the way into town today, I saw a bumper sticker that testifies to that attitude. "Chicago Cubs," it said, "1908 World Champs." I started to smile until I realized that we just bought a major league baseball team that has never won more than a division title ... yet.

I did notice in this morning's paper, that the Cubs are leading their division. And I am hoping to return to Chicago twice this fall. First, for the American League Championship series between your White Sox and our mighty Angels of Anaheim. Then, for the World Series between your Cubs and our Angels.

More than a hundred years ago, Mark Twain wrote about your city and what he said then has lost nothing in the passage of time. "That astonishing Chicago," wrote Twain. "A city where they are always rubbing the lamp and fetching up the genie and contriving and achieving new impossibilities."

That would certainly explain Dennis Rodman.

But Chicago is famous for many other reasons: Air Jordan, of course, and Scotty Pippin, deep dish pizza ... and celebrities

near and dear to my Disney heart like Oprah Winfrey and Siskel & Ebert.

I asked your meeting chairman Andrew McKenna how long I should speak this afternoon. He said I could speak as long as I wanted to, but they would disconnect the microphone at 1:35. I detect a subtle message there ... so I will try to follow the best advice on public speaking I ever received: Be clear, be brief, be seated.

This afternoon I'd like to talk about a subject that occupies a great deal of my conscious thought ... and that is how to manage a rapidly growing creative company ... in a time of accelerating change.

When I joined Disney almost 12 years ago, the company had 35,000 full-time employees. With the completion of our recent acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC we have nearly 117,000. We had about 120,000 stockholders then. We have about 1.3 million today.

I mention these statistics not to prove how majestic we are, but to show how fast we have grown. The great danger that arises out of such fast growth is that a company can sometimes lose its focus, forget its mission, take its eye off of its core competency. Not only is rapid growth a problem, but success, unless properly handled, can be toxic, too. I have watched other big corporations and have seen what can frequently happen after a long and triumphant run. The mighty stumble and fall.

Some may rise again Phoenix-like, but others just fade to shadows of their former selves. Too many tend to become self-satisfied or overconfident or arrogant or lazy or restless ... or, in the worst case, all of the above.

Of course we are none of these. Who else would sell a 100-year bond?

How do you continue to grow and yet avoid these pitfalls?

How do you manage a company like Disney, whose principal asset is creativity, and make sure it remains young and vibrant without losing its upward trajectory or its sense of great adventure ... so that it doesn't become so heavy with bureaucracy and rules that it crashes to the ground?

We at Disney do not have all the answers, but I would like to share with you today some of the things we think are necessary.

A response Babe Ruth once gave to a reporter sticks in my