Vital Speeches of the Day

Bombarded On All Sides

HANDLING EVERYDAY INFORMATION

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In the beginning God created the heavens and earth, and about four billion years later, humankind. How did we initially fend for ourselves? What was our economic livelihood? How did we make it through this earth? We were hunters and gatherers. Before hunting and gathering came into full swing, and before the bow and arrow were perfected, people were gored by bulls.

The next great age of humankind was the age of agriculture; people learned they could plant seeds and grow corn. Before the age of agriculture coalesced, people starved because there wasn't enough corn. After that age, came the age of industry—production, consumption, capitol goods, shipments, and warehousing. Before the age of industry was in full swing, many people caught their fingers in machines.

The Information Age Isn't Here

What age are we about to embark on? We are in a nether-land, an era I call the Over- information age. The age of information is coming, and when the age of information is here, we will have a different perspective than we do now. In the information age computers will be voice-activated. When you want information you talk to a wall, because there's a computer built into it. You will say, "Computer, give me the information on this subject," and a friendly voice will give you the information. If you ask the computer a question and it doesn't respond the way you want, you can ask it differently.

When we are in the information age, we will not have to deal with clipboards, printouts, posted pads, instruction manuals, 89-page DVD instruction manuals. You will not have to deal with everything that's beating down on you now, because there will be another way to proceed: Information will be as accessible as turning on a light switch. The problem is that, between now and then, you're going to be subject to a daily glut of information competing for your attention. Every time the government passes another piece of legislature or adds to a policy, it results in more paper on your desk.

When it comes to online information, the number of e-mails you receive is probably growing at a frightening pace. Actually, among those with e-mail accounts, the number of e-mails everyone is receiving daily is escalating.

Since the start of the century, the annual number of e-mails to members of the U.S. Congress exceeds 80 mil-

lion. This excess results in members routinely ignoring most of them. The Associated Press reported that some senators receive up to 55,000 e-mails a month, whereas house members only get about 8,000.

While millions of e-mails come from their constituents, most of the e-mails members of Congress receive come from advocacy groups and corporate lobbyists — generally people from outside their state or congressional districts. That's what happens when anybody can send to anybody with the click of a mouse! Simply because you can send to anyone, doesn't mean you should.

Okay, so you're not in Congress. Nevertheless, depending on which study you encounter, the typical executive today receives 150-190 e-mails a day, much of it spam! More than 35 percent of the 400 managers polled by the American Management Association and Ernst & Young say they use e-mail the most of any communication tool. Despite software filters and ISP crackdowns on offenders, mass delivery from spammers has risen dramatically. And why not? Using unsecured, third-party servers, a spammer can target nearly every e-mail address found on the net at practically no cost, since the ISP pays for the transmission.

According to Jupiter Communications, there are far more e-mail accounts on record in the U.S. than the size of the US population. The spammers know this and do their best to try and get their junk into everyone's in-box!

Some of it is Vital

You need to grasp the information that impacts your career, know how to stay on top of it, and have the strength to leave the rest behind. I'm not suggesting you ignore things willy-nilly, but that you make conscious choices about where to give your time and attention. As surely as this speech will come to a close, your life will end, and you'll have been caught up in the glut of everything you could ingest, never having arrived where you had hoped.

How do we grasp vital information that comes our way, stay on top of it, and have rewarding and productive careers? The first thing to realize is that the only person in charge of the breathing space, freedom, and peace of mind that you enjoy in your life—is you.

A lot of people have excuses; they say they have to know this, that there's going to be a pop quiz, or that the landlord, the mayor, their bosses or wives, are forcing the glut upon them. Someone else is forcing them to receive more magazine subscriptions than they can possibly keep up with, forcing them to put their name on more mailing lists. No one is doing this. There are responsibilities at work that you're going to have to stay on top of, and regulations that are important, but we are the ones—we do it to ourselves.

The more information you attempt to consume, the more you seek to acquire. We are information switchboards, marveling at how much we can keep our fingers on. To make sure there's never another dull moment, we're going to open up yet another magazine, rent yet another video, look at yet another bulletin.

While researching to write the second edition of my book Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society, I found that more information is generated in a single second than you can ingest for the duration of your life. More than previous generations, we have to have the strength to say no. We have to recognize that less is more, acknowledge that we can only take in so much, retain so much, and only use so much.

Raiding the Information Thoroughfares

Even with the widespread use of Internet and e-mail, when we talk about information over- glut, paper is the largest culprit. In the U.S. we have the lowest postal rates in the world, which contributes to a huge direct mail industry. We also have the most amount of paper-generating equipment per capita, more fax machines, more laser printers, personal computers, and personal copiers. We generate paper—this alone insures that for at least another decade we will continue to be besieged by paper.

We have double the paper in our country than in any other country on earth—the typical adult in our society encounters double that of Japan, and triple the number of other societies. Because we paper each other into an oblivion, the most important task is handling paper. Your goal is to get and stay in control of the paper that comes your way.

First, get off extraneous mailing lists. It is a wonderful, sweet morning when you open up your mail box, and instead of eighteen pieces of mail and twelve of them junk, there's only six. Develop a form letter, sticker, or stamper that you mail back to the other party saying, "Please take me off your list."

There are things you want to receive. Don't pitch everything coming in, but recognize that problems begin when you allow one unnecessary piece of paper to enter your office. Every unneeded page is a potential mutineer—a rebel that could bring down your kingdom.

Fight to keep your desk clear. If you keep the spaces of your life clear—especially the flat spaces—the top of your desk, top of your filing cabinet, corners and window sills around the room, control of your time and control of your life tend to follow.

Do the same with email. As have other technologies, e-mail usage has spread so fast that it has exceeded our ability to successfully adapt to this form of communication. Most people dash off e-mails at high speed. I'm not

knocking the high rate of typos and grammatical errors — that is not a huge issue regarding e-mail use. However, have you ever teed off anyone because of an e-mail? Your stark letters on the screen of your recipient can easily be misinterpreted and, unfortunately, this happens all the time. Did you ever receive a disappointing or questionable e-mail from someone you like?

Sometimes an e-mail message can make you seem as if you're curt or abrasive. It's not that you intended to ruffle any feathers; it's just that e-mail, unless worded carefully, can sometimes come off as impersonal, cold, and uncaring.

Too few people apparently are using the draft box and clicking the send button nanoseconds after typing the last letter in their message. As with traditional writing, when possible, perhaps it's best to park e-mails for a day and revisit them before sending. With some e-mail service providers, you have the option to delay sending until a prearranged time. With most providers, you have the option to either park an e-mail message in the "draft message" box or to send it. For enhanced communication and better relationships, you can always pick up the phone.

If you rely on e-mail too much — such as sending e-mail when a face-to-face conversation was more appropriate — you may be seen as somewhat aloof. People seeking a way to avoid face-to-face conflict will often use e-mail. If you feel that a conversation is warranted, you're probably right. Go ahead and make that visit or that phone call. If you need a yes or no answer, or to easily transmit the data that someone has requested or is waiting for, then proceed with e-mail.

Don't use e-mail as a substitute for conversation because you will tie up endless amounts of time. It could easily take a dozen rounds of e-mail for two people to achieve the same level of communication and understanding that's possible with two minutes of conversation.

Streamline the Information Mine

Here are a variety of other techniques. Strip arriving mail down immediately—discover what parts are vital, and what can be tossed or recycled. At the copier, create single sheets representing dossiers of the larger packets you receive. When I receive a large packet of information, the first thing I do is go through with the edge of a ruler and rip out the paragraphs, addresses, phone numbers, and key data. I lay these down on the copier and design one sheet from the package I received.

Get in the habit of streamlining the information you receive: books, reports, regardless how big and thick the item. Most of us can scan a two hundred page book in ten or fifteen minutes, picking out the eight or ten pages we need: Reduce books to their essence, copy the key pages, the table of contents, address of the publisher, other printed information, catalogs, fliers, scan it, break it down, chuck and recycle the rest.

Strip down magazines to their essence. When you receive a magazine, even one that you want, do you need the whole magazine? Usually you can pull out the few articles that matter, and recycle the rest.

When you look at a pile, and let that pile go, the task becomes overwhelming in your mind. You think, "How am I going to deal with that information?" When you keep the volume down, it seems manageable. Perception is an important tool. When you believe you're on top, you'll act like you're on top, and when you act like you're on top, you'll be on top. It's not merely positive thinking—a chain reaction occurs, and it works.

With email you have to remember that constantly checking for e-mail or sending it has become an obsession for many people and a serious time drain. Actively seek to limit your e-mail use. Also avoid using the same type of words that spammers use; chances are your e-mail will get discarded. Posting your e-mail address anywhere on the Internet makes it available to spammers. Be cautious and consider using a second, more private e-mail account.

Consider that working offline can increase your productivity when back online. When you arrive at the office each morning, do you check your e-mail right away? If so, you may not be as productive as you could be. While in some professions checking e-mail first is mandatory, many professionals have the option of checking e-mail when they choose. Here's the case for not e-mailing until later in the day.

When you log on first thing in the morning, you're automatically compelled to pay attention to what's new, current, or tugging at your time and attention. Whatever you had planned for the day ends up taking second place to tasks you feel obligated to perform as a result of the e-mails you received. This is not to say that you are not receiving important e-mails that represent important tasks and require timely turnaround. The question becomes which is more important: to proceed based upon your personally crafted agenda or the one that transpires as a result of being hit by many, many e-mails?

When I come into my office in the morning, I take a look offline at the e-mails from previous days that I have saved and arranged in various files and folders. Quietly and unhurriedly, I compose letters offline and put them into the "drafts" folder. For those e-mails I have received that merit a reply, I carefully cut and paste the elements of the message that I want to include in my reply and prepare my response underneath. I send it when I'm ready, not in a rush.

Much of what I receive consists of items that I wish to copy and move into my word processing software because they are worth retaining on my hard drive. I also do this offline and at my own pace.

While remaining offline, I examine e-mails that I didn't know what to do with the first time around. Sometimes I delete them. Some I file for future examination. Most I deal with then and there, formulating replies and saving them in the drafts pile.

When I'm ready to go online, I feel comfortable and secure. I have mastered my entire e-mail file up to that point. I am in control. Granted, when I go online I'll find new messages that represents everything from urgent and important tasks to less important items and spam.

Because I have not logged on as the first activity in the morning and not allowed myself to be besieged by all types of new messages, I'm in a more commanding position to take action as I see fit and stay in control of my time and my day.

A Resting Place for the Ill-received

Establish a drawer, or on disk, a file, where you can temporarily house what you want out of sight. Close the drawer, because it's important that you don't have to see it. For each item that crosses your desk, ask these fundamental questions:

What's the issue behind the document?

What does it represent?

Why did I receive it?

Why keep this? (Is it important? If it will be replaced soon, I don't need it.)

Should I have received this? How else can this be handled? Can I delegate it?

Can I file it under "Review in six months?"

What will happen if I don't handle this?

Many people have rotating tickler files where they set up the months and the weeks. It's a place to park things when you can't figure out what to do with them. You may ask, "But aren't I postponing my ability to deal with the over-glut? Aren't I throwing this in the files where I'm going to have to deal with it in another three weeks?" No, and here's why: When three weeks rolls around, and you find the information you filed, the answer may take care of itself. You know it can be chucked, or that it is more important than you first thought. A lot of times a little time gives you a definitive answer. You're not postponing dealing with the over-glut—you're simply reviewing it at a better time.

When you're in control of your information and files, you're able to retrieve items easily and use them. Information is power. If you can't find what you have, it's of no value.

File with Style

In an information over-glut era, filing is essential. What you file, given that you've made good choices about what to retain, supports your career. The goal of filing is to withdraw what you need when you need it (whether it's on a hard disk or in filing cabinet). The basic tools you need to file are: a wastebasket, file folders, file labels, maybe a magic marker, and a chair—all basic stuff. Of course, it doesn't look glamorous, or feel good.

I file for half a morning once a week. You need only time and energy—there's no magic to organizing. It's not glamorous, and it's not likely to ever be glamorous, but it is important. To begin filing, go to the Office Marts of the world and buy colored file folders, colored file tabs, and dots. Like dentist's offices, that usually have visible and color-coded files, you can set this system up to support you. You could have everything related to government in red files, and everything related to marketing in green.

The more files you have, the more difficult it is to determine which file to pick. You are better off with a handful of files; you have a much greater incidence of choosing the right file. Hereafter, sort through your files, look for outdated items, and make it fun. Pare down those files until you have only the essence. Be creative when you file. Feel free to experiment—create files that say, "Check in a month," "Check next year," or "I don't know what to do with this." Feel good about your style of filing.

Shackled by the Paralysis of Analysis

Most people believe that they need reams of data before making a decision. In an over-information society, regardless of whether you're going to make a purchase, hire someone, or open up a drive through—you'll find enough information to persuade you to go both left and right. You'll find so much information that a clear-cut decision is impossible.

A study was completed on the use of information in making decisions. Two groups of individuals had to make purchase decisions. One group was given data, analysis, and articles, everything they needed. The other group made the decision based on instinct. After a few weeks, the two groups were able to see the results: the group that felt better about their decision had chosen on instinct.

If you are forty years old, forty years of data is brought to bear when you make a decision. Instinct, then, is not based on a moment's whim—it's everything you've ever learned in your thirty or forty years of existence. Each of us has the ability to make intuitive choices, but for many, the word intuition or instinct is taboo. Yet the top C.E.O.s of large companies often choose based on what feels right. More data is not always the answer.

Finding a New Route

Unfortunately, for the rest of your life you're going to

be inundated by more things competing for your time and attention than you can possibly engage. It's not going to change, but luckily you haven't even scratched the surface of your ability to manage the information that comes your way. You've got to make new rules, and take new approaches—regardless of what your peers are doing, because most of them are also inundated by information. Most people in industrialized nations wake up in the morning with the first thought of the day being, "Ugh! I'm behind for the day!" You don't have to.