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Taking Back Control of Our Days

IMPORTANCE OF TAKING TIME FOR QUIET REFLECTION

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Breathing space will be my first words and my last. I want to thank the program committee.. to put on a program like this requires lots of time and effort....

It seems as if the pace of life is sped up for everyone. To understand why this is so, let's step back for a moment. Following World War II, and at least through the 1970's, it was widely held by time management specialists that the typical office worker earned a full day's pay for a 60% effort. In other words, over the course of an eight hour workday, the typical worker actually performed job-related work for 60% of the time, or 4.8 hours.

The rest of the time, totaling 40% of the day, was frittered away on daydreams, most often thinking about sex!, also personal phone calls, coffee breaks, bathroom breaks, extraneous reading (not necessarily in the bathroom), and even crossword puzzles!

Some studies indicate that, despite all the demands and responsibilities they face, workers today still waste away

a sizable chunk of most days. Still, today's career professional faces more to do at work than his or her counterpart of, say, a generation ago.

Without offering an involved explanation about rising productivity levels, let me simply say that today's career professional, frittering and all, could beat the pants off of yesteryear's career professional in terms of getting things done. Today, workers in all types of organizations, including government, non-profit sector groups, health care, and education, as well as private industry devote a slightly higher percentage of their time to the tasks and responsibilities for which they actually were hired, and they have advanced tools that aid them in ways that the workforce ancestry could hardly imagine .

The computer has actually increased U.S. labor productivity measured in output per hour, no matter how you cut it. Robert Gordon, author of the book *Macroeconomics* reports that labor productivity is now on the order of 10 times what it was when the first electricity plant began

operation in 1882.

To be sure, now and then many people goof off at the click of a mouse. Surveys show that non-job related web-surfing and e-mail correspondence is rampant. Who doesn't make personal phone calls or attend to personal business during the workday?

Even with the latest diversions, most workers are making diligent efforts a decent percentage of the time. The higher-level of industriousness among today's workforce may be a sensible reaction to the competitiveness in the workplace, a scarcity of higher paying jobs, or the fear of being axed. It could be because they're dedicated, goal oriented, highly ethical, fearful of losing their jobs, or a combination of all the above.

Or, it may be a result of improved workplace monitoring techniques. An employer's ability to gage actual performance levels of employees has never been greater than it is today. Local area networks rule. So do surveillance cameras. Surveys show that more than 60% of employers monitor employees only activities and at least 15% of employers observe employees via hidden camera. No fun.

Perhaps an underlying element for the increase in productivity across the board is the increase in expectations. As soon as greater technological capabilities come along, BAM! So do expectations. In 1827, the Erie Canal became functional for the passage of horse drawn canal ships — at the blazing speed of four miles per hour. So many vendors wanted to transport their goods from the west through the Canal, and to the Hudson River down to New York City, that the Canal immediately became clogged. And so, it was enlarged, then again dramatically enlarged, and then yet again.

At every junction expectations about the traffic volume that the Canal could handle rose and then, almost instantly, existing Canal capacity was never enough. Soon the railroads became popular and for many the Canal fell into disuse until it became a recreational and tourist attraction in the 20th century. It went from expectation to over expectation to abandonment within a generation. How cold!

In the typical office, before electric typewriters, and certainly before PCs, getting 25 or 30 original business letters out the door in a day once represented an impressive achievement, all that an employer could expect from a worker in one day. Now a day, anyone, and I mean anyone including some ten year-olds, can generate 500 to 1,000 letters in a day if one chooses, and that wouldn't even be news. On any given day the aggregate of emails sent by individuals, and we're not talking about spam here, is 500 to 600 times greater than the entire aggregation of web pages accessible on the Internet.

In 1905, the typical person generated only a tiny amount

of information in his or her entire life. Whereas notable people wrote dozens and dozens of letters, the typical person wrote only a handful. Today, by some estimates, career professionals write 80% to 85% of all original documents.

As a side note, researchers at the University of California at Berkeley in the Department of Information Sciences concluded that if the total amount of unique information annually generated in the world were to be parceled out to every man woman and child on earth, each person would be given a personal library equivalent to 250 books.

One estimate holds that information doubles in the world every 72 days. The Library of Congress catalogues 7,000 new items each day. More than 2,000 new websites go online each day. A minimum of two thousand books are published world wide each day. In 1947, the first year Books in Print started collecting data, there were 85,000 titles in existence and 45 publishers listed. Fifty years later, there were almost 50,000 publishing houses in the U.S. alone.

No matter how competent, adept, organized or clever one may otherwise be, virtually all career professionals today find themselves in a daily tidal wave of information, the likes of which are unprecedented in the history of the human race. And the unvoiced expectation is that you're supposed to be able to handle it all. British author and psychologist David Lewis, Ph.D. says that "having too much information can be as dangerous as having too little. It can lead to a paralysis of analysis, making it harder to find the right solutions or make decisions."

No course that you took in college, no article or book, no mentor, no company training session, nothing you've likely experienced thus far in your professional or personal lives has prepared you for functioning smoothly in a world of unrelenting exponential information generation. The inmates have the keys, the cell doors are open, and data has run amok.

Complexity Everywhere

Your everyday supermarket now carries roughly 40,000 items, twice as many as a decade ago. There are so many products, so many brands and sub-species of those brands that no consumer is safe from the bombardment of choice overload. The manufacturers plead mea culpa — they are trying to differentiate their products to reach selected niches, a vital and necessary component of survival in the hyper-intense capitalistic jungle.

For example, more than 16 varieties just of Colgate toothpaste, 75 types of Pantene hair care treatments, a 110 varieties of Hallmark greeting cards, and untold numbers of other products just from the same vendor in the

same product line are available.

A huge variety of product offering doesn't aid consumers. It is insanity. From the vast array of athletic shoes to bagels to portable CD players to bottled water, there quickly becomes a point at which mega-choices like mega-information do not serve the consumer; they abuse him.

It seems everywhere you turn, people seek to complicate things. Many of the devices that we buy could serve us simply, but do they? From TVs to answering machines to cell phones to copiers and everything in between, are our electronic gadgets getting easier to use? Where is the long-promised plug-in and play computer?

At the center of this information, communication, and technology tsunami, unquestionably, is the almighty microchip which plugs into the all-pervasive personal computer.

Since 1971 when Intel invented the microprocessor, computer's labor-saving benefits have been widely touted. Computers provide us with the ability to accomplish a great deal of work in a relatively short amount of time, be it research, number crunching, document preparation, or communication. While computers have contributed to productivity increases unlike any device that came before it, people everywhere continue to wrestle with how to use computers to their best advantage.

We sit in front of our keyboards and try to take control of our little corner of the world. We communicate with staff, impress our bosses, and do our best to stay on top of things, but at the same time, we visit our favorite blogs, comparison shop online, and pass jokes back and forth — not the essence of getting things done.

Management, with alarming irregularity, wants to know what we're typing, at what we're looking, with whom we're communicating, and what we're passing back and forth. The temptation that a PC in general, and the Internet in particular, provides can lure even the most diligent, loyal, and hard working among us. Who has not strayed during the course of the day, sometimes for prolonged periods?

Who here can stand up and say that they have not taken chunks of time here and there away from their employer, proceeding all the while as if no one will know the difference? Though the word is rarely used, such forays are actually a form of theft. You can rationalize your escapes as long as you get the job done, i.e. who cares if you take a couple of minutes here and there for your own interests? Besides, you're not on the clock, you're a salaried or commission-based employee. Still, if the tables were turned, wouldn't you feel you had a right to know when your employees were actually working versus not?

The larger the corporation, the more likely the reliance on surveillance so that managers and supervisors can discern on an hour by hour basis, say, how many key strokes

a worker has made in preparing a report, how many products were scanned at the register, how many multi mega-byte files were downloaded, or how many calls from the field were answered and addressed.

Hopefully, desirably, thankfully, you're not among the lot who strays for large blocks of time throughout the day. You have the ability to self-regulate. You recognize that we live in an information overloaded society with too many websites, publications, and electronic media bidding for your attention.

You buck up and decide to get lean and mean. You're gonna hack your way through the tangle of information and communication overload. You strip away anything that smells of excess or encroaches upon your ability to stay on the straight and narrow path to high productivity.

You reflexively speed up your routine so that you can get through the day's deluge of emails, open the mail and address it, handle the memos, tend to the faxes, return the phone calls, and still come up smiling. In this world, minutes and even seconds count. Money is not the key currency of life anymore, it's time.

In deftly speeding through all that comes your way however, a new kind of problem arises. In your quest to get one thing done after another, your creativity, spontaneity, and joie de vivre diminish.

When your brain is always engaged, when your neurons are always firing, when you find yourself in a continual mode of reacting and responding, instead of steering and directing, the best and brightest solutions that you are capable of producing rarely see the light of day.

To Accomplish More or to Have a Life?

You're firmly caught in a trap without realizing that you are. Like everyone else, you're adopting the same survival mechanisms, galloping along on the same treadmill, and defaulting into the same operational cycles.

If new insights or fresh perspectives spring forth, will you, can you, actually act upon them? Do you have any chance of thinking new thoughts or are you simply generating permeations of all your previous thoughts?

Since the start of the 1990s, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) has been on the rise, not just among children, but now among the adult population as well. Victims of adult ADD are likely to initiate more tasks and projects than they'll ever finish, get bored easily, seek thrills readily, have a propensity to be late while loathing having to wait, and not be averse to taking foolish risks. The sudden rise of adult ADD, while it may have genetic components, certainly receives a major boost from our kinetic, hyper-speed, information-bombarded society.

The typical fall fashion magazine compels readers to flip through 128 pages before finding the first feature ar-

ticle. In 1965, the typical news sound bite lasted 45 seconds. By the year 2,000 it had dropped to 8 seconds. Ad clutter has increased annually since 1985 and has now exceeded the over-whelming level for many viewers.

In 2002, every hour of daytime network TV offered nearly 21 minutes of commercials, up from 10 to 12 minutes decades before. Some cable networks feature 60 seconds of ads for every 140 seconds of programming, in other words 30% of the total broadcast.

While the typical TV advertisement was 53 seconds in 1965, by 2000 it had dropped to 25 seconds with 15 second ads as well as 3 second ads peppering viewers at every turn. There is competition for every single moment you have to spare and for those you don't have to spare.

Let's face it, "Brave new world" is here. When you don't have, or feel you don't have an extra moment to read philosophy, history, or science, when great literature, plays and novels are as foreign to you as hieroglyphics, do you have any chance of seeing your work, career, or life in a new light? You might be doing well in the race but it's the same race essentially down the same track with the same opponents that may prove to be less than sufficient in enabling you to get those kinds of things done that you want to have completed.

Aldous Huxley said, right in his book "People never are alone now ...We make them hate solitude, and we arrange their lives so that it's almost impossible for them ever to have it." That was in 1932, when he wrote that.

Even if you're among the rare few who recognize how crucial safeguarding your day and work time has become, the chances are highly likely that you are not immune to the call of the modern day sirens — the cell phones, pagers, and beepers.

Cell Phone Intrusion

The results are in and the cell phone has become the most disruptive aspect of work and everyday life. With now more than four-fifths of the population sporting these little gadgets, it's now taken as a given that any part of your day is subject to disruption.

On a plane, in a meeting, during a presentation, at a business lunch, or yes, in the restroom, some probably well-meaning but otherwise totally boorish soul will whip out his cell phone and engage in public space cell yell. And the conversations, my goodness, are they inane. If everyone uses a cell phone in the restroom or a lunch or during a meeting and uses it at will, how long will it take before we all go mad?

The 2003 annual Lemelson-MIT invention index survey found that when asked to name the invention they hate the most but can't live without, 30 percent of respondents said the cell phone. Second to the cell phone were alarm clocks at 25 percent, followed by television at 23

percent and razors at 14 percent.

My friend, Paul Radde, is author of the book *Thrival*. Paul says "Cell phone use is not just plain rude, it is mentally distracting and abusive to others. Cell phone use captures the brain's interest in completing the conversation, so whether the user is broadcasting or simply within earshot, the Zeigarnik effect kicks in. This is the same desire for closure that makes the effects of multi-tasking akin to the effects of post-traumatic stress."

The Zeigarnik effect is characterized by the tendency for people to remember interrupted tasks better than those that have been completed. "Once taken off one task, without completing the transaction," Radde observes, "the mind continues to seek closure. If you have a number of things going, but none of them to completion, you have these tensions tending toward completion — and that is stress-provoking."

It's not that you can't get things done with the use of a cell phone, indeed you can get a lot of things done. However, the nature of what you get done is highly skewed. Just as the man with only a hammer sees everything as nails, the incessant cell phone user accomplishes a variety of tasks, understandably enough, that accrue directly to having a cell phone.

Sometimes this get-it-done kind of individual over does this stay-in-touch aspect of what he's trying to accomplish. I mean, how many times can you call a client? How often do you need to stay in touch with your office. Would every 60 minutes do it, or would 45 minutes be better, or 30 better still? What kinds of new tasks and new responsibilities at work are you creating for yourself and others as a result of the constant communication and, need I say it, over-communication?

Too many career professionals — gung-ho, get ahead career types — are uncomfortable with solitude. Increasingly, this discomfort tolerates only shorter and shorter attention spans. To retreat into one's own mind, to pause, to reflect is now treated as if it were enemy territory.

As the world wide web and interactive media begin to purvey our lives at even higher levels than they do now through the myriad of hand held and miniature devices as well as publicly pervasive audio/video displays, any career professional who wants a quiet, reflective moment is going to have to fight for it.

Weirdly, oddly, sadly, the higher the level of distraction, as with information overload, the greater we tend to seek it. You can get things done with electronic gadgetry, but beware, the types of things you get done will be of a certain ilk. Whole other realms of accomplishments may be unknown or out of reach for you.

Long-term trends all but guarantee that in the future,

the environment all around you will only get noisier. The distractions will come faster, louder and more furiously. It is vital to regain or perhaps develop for the first time the ability to take quiet reflection. In doing so, at first, you will feel as if you've been left out of the party, but was it a party you wanted to attend in the first place? And even if you wanted to attend, did you want to attend all the time at that decibel level with no breaks?

Long-term types of accomplishment, grand achieve-

ments in your career — the big stuff — may require going where you haven't gone before, to that place and frame of mind where the best of your thoughts can emerge.

When you learn to value quiet reflection over frenetic activity, the breadth and scope of what you can get done improves remarkably. You actually get to reclaim your day. Silence can be golden, but only if you respect it, know how to harness it, and recognize the gift that it has always provided.... You've been a wonderful audience, may you all have breathing space!