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Do you feel continually besieged by information? There's good reason: One estimate holds that information doubles in the world every 72 days. The Library of Congress catalogs 7,000 new items each day. More than 2,000 new Websites go online each day. A minimum of 2,000 books are published worldwide each day. Whew!

If you're able to eliminate a lot of the extraneous information that makes its way to you, you'll actually experience being overwhelmed less frequently and you won't feel as overworked. It's important to understand that you control the spaces in your life, and information is stored in spaces—tables, shelves, disks, Websites, etc.

If your desk is a mess right now, strewn high with piles that are growing higher, remember, you're the one who controls that space. The same principle applies to your filing cabinet, your shelves, your tabletops, or your glove compartment. You're the one controlling your space, and this acknowledgment will allow you to stay in control of your information.

If you're facing volumes of information, divide and conquer. You may be facing a 10-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. It's harmful to ingest too much information at once. 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.

Tickler files

It's 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 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.

If it's the second day of the month, for example, but you receive something that you won't need to deal with 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 to handle 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 continually take files that were in the 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.

Letting go of excess

What else works? I suggest opening your mail over the wastebasket; it's much easier to throw things out with the wastebasket 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. Hereafter, whenever information crosses your desk, ask yourself:

- Should I have received this at all?
- What is the issue behind this document?
- Is the information of marginal value such that I could easily skip it?
- Will it make a dent in my

Fighting Information Overload

- career if I don't retain it? If not, then let it go!
- Will it matter if I don't handle it at all?
- What am I saving it for?
- Do I need it, or do I fear that if I don't have it, I'll somehow be deficient?
- Does it support what I already know or believe?
- Is it an information crutch I want to walk around on?
- Can I delegate the information in the document?
- Can I file the new information in my tickler file as something to review next month? (Most of what crosses your desk doesn't need to linger; it can go elsewhere.)

When you're in control of your information, you can better retrieve it and more easily use it. Information is power, but if you can't find what you've retained, it's of no value.

A lifetime guarantee

When you understand what you're up against, you're in a far better position to take control. The reality is you're part of the pioneer generation, moving into an ultra-rapidly changing future of even more information and communication, and you can handle it—you have the intelligence and the capability. **5**

Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, based in Chapel Hill, N.C., helps organizations and individuals overcome the relentless burden of information and communication overload. Visit www.BreathingSpace.com for more on Jeff's keynote speeches and seminars.