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Unscrambling Information Overload

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

An Excerpt from His Presentation at the Scottsdale Chamber of Commerce Showcase & Expo '99 Luncheon

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 his or her time and attention. Each of us, on a daily basis, faces more information than any generation in history. 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 lived principally 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 great age of industry, in which all manner of capital was 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 that 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.

The Shortcomings of the Information Age

To greater understand how we are besieged with information, consider this. In the industrial age, when people needed to achieve something, did they have to go through a series of motions, read manuals, or become experts at the task? Not at all. It wasn't necessary to know a single thing about lighting; all one



Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC
is a national speaker and a leading authority on 21st century career and lifestyle strategies.

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needed to do was flip a switch to turn the light on. Lighting is a product of the industrial age, and lights serve you. 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.

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. 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.

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. What we have failed to learn is how to let go of the things that aren't so important to retain.

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. The growth of words in the English language in the last several decades is half the total number of words in many entire languages!

Consider 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. 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.

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.

The massive overkill of 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