

Overworked Americans or Overwhelmed Americans?

By Jeff Davidson

Americans' leisure time is being eroded by social forces beyond their control. Here is a thought-provoking look at why most people are caught in a frenzied, time-pressured existence despite their efforts to live and work at a comfortable pace.

Here is a multiple-choice quiz question:

Which word best describes the typical working American today?

- A) *Overworked*
- B) *Underworked*
- C) *Energetic*
- D) *Lazy*

Although much has been written about whether A, B, C, or D is correct, the most appropriate answer may well be "none of the above." Powerful social forces have the potential to turn each of us into human whirlwinds charging about in fast forward. *Work, time away from work, and everything in between* appear to be part of a never-ending, ever-lengthening list of things to do during days that race by.

To say that Americans work too many hours, and that too much work is at the root of the time pressure we feel and the leisure we lack, is to miss the convergence of larger, more fundamental issues. We could effectively handle the longer hours that we work compared with the Europeans (actually less than 79 minutes daily). It's everything else competing for our attention that leaves us feeling overwhelmed. Once overwhelmed, the

feeling of being overworked quickly follows.

Nearly every aspect of American society has become more complex since the mid-1980s. Traveling is more

cumbersome. Learning new ways to manage and to increase productivity takes its toll. *Merely living* in America today and participating as a functioning member of society guarantees that your day, week, month, year, and life as well as your physical, emotional, and spiritual energy will easily be depleted unless you find the proper vantage point from which to approach each day.

Do you personally know *anyone* who works for a living who consistently has unscheduled, free stretches?

Five factors, or "mega-realities," simultaneously contribute to the perceived and actual erosion of leisure time among Americans:

- Population growth
- An expanding volume of knowledge
- Mass media growth and electronic addiction
- The paper-trail culture
- An overabundance of choices



Population



From the beginning of creation to 1850 A.D., world population grew to 1 billion. It grew to 2 billion by 1930, 3 billion by 1960, 4 billion by 1979, and 5 billion by 1987, with 6 billion coming. Every thirty-three months, the current population of America—257 million people—is added to the planet.

The world of your childhood is gone forever. The present is crowded and becoming more so. Each day, world population (births minus deaths) increases by *more than 260 thousand people*. Regardless of your political, religious, or economic views, the fact remains that geometric growth in human population permeates and dominates every aspect of the planet and its resources. This is the most compelling aspect of our existence, and will be linked momentarily to the four other mega-realities.

When JFK was elected president, domestic population was 180 million. It grew by 70 million in one generation. Our growing population has not dispersed over the nation's 5.4 million square miles. About 97 percent of the U.S. population resides on 3 percent of the land mass. Half our population resides within 50 miles of the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. Seventy-five percent live in urban areas, with 80 percent predicted by the end of the nineties.

More densely packed urban areas have resulted predictably in a gridlock of the nation's transportation systems. It is taking you longer merely to drive a few blocks; it's not your imagination, it's not the day of the week or the season, and it's not going to subside soon. Our population and road use are growing faster than our ability to repair highways, bridges, and arteries. In fact, vehicles (primarily cars) are multiplying twice as fast as people, currently approaching 400 million vehicles, compared with 165 million registered motorists.

Some 86 percent of American commuters still get to work by automobile, and 84 percent of inner-city travel is by

car. Americans commute an average of 157,600 miles to work during their working life, a distance equal to six times around the earth. Commuting snarls are increasing.

City planners report there will be no clear solution to gridlock for decades, and studies reveal that our nation's metropolitan areas will become home to *an even greater percentage of the population*. Even less-populated urban areas will face unending traffic dilemmas. Gridlock is not confined to commuter arteries. Shoppers, air travelers, vacationers, even campers—everyone in motion is feeling or will be feeling its effects.

Knowledge



Everybody in America fears that they are underinformed. This moment, you and everyone you know are being bombarded on all sides. *Overinformation* wreaks havoc on the receptive capacities of the unwary. The volume of new knowledge broadcast and published in every field is enormous and exceeds anyone's ability to keep pace. All told, more words are published or broadcast *in a day* than you could comfortably ingest in the rest of your life. By far, America leads the world in the sheer volume of information generated and disseminated.

There is no body of knowledge that everyone can be expected to know. In its 140th year, for example, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., added 942,000 items to its collections. Even our language keeps expanding. Since 1966, more than 60,000 words have been added to the English language—equal to half or more of the words in some languages. The Harvard Library subscribes to 160,000 journals and periodicals.

With more information comes more misinformation. Annually, more than 40,000 scientific journals publish over 1 million new articles. "The number of scientific articles and journals published worldwide is starting to confuse researchers, overwhelm the quali-

ty-control systems of science, encourage fraud, and distort the dissemination of important findings," says *New York Times* science journalist William J. Broad.

In America, too many legislators, regulators, and others entrusted to devise the rules that guide the course of society *take shelter in the information overglut by intentionally adding to it*. We are saddled with twenty-six-page laws that could be stated in two pages, and regulations that contradict themselves every fourth page. This phenomenon is not confined to Capitol Hill. Impossible VCR manuals, insurance policies, sweepstakes instructions, and frequent-flyer bonus plans all contribute to our immobility.

Media Growth



The effects of mass media on our lives continue unchecked. Worldwide media coverage certainly yields benefits. Democracy springs forth when oppressed people have a chance to learn how people in free societies live. As we spend more hours tuned to electronic media, we are exposed to tens of thousands of messages and images.

In America, more than three of every five television households own VCRs. The number of movie tickets sold and videos rented annually has exceeded 1 billion for each since 1988. More than 575 motion pictures are produced each year compared with an average of 175 twelve years ago. In 1972, three networks dominated television—ABC, NBC, and CBS. There are now 339 full-power, independent TV stations, and many cable subscribers receive up to 140 channels offering more than 72,000 shows per month. The average American spends more than eight years watching electronically how other people supposedly live.

To capture overstimulated, distracted viewers, American television and other news media increasingly rely on sensationalism. Like too much food at once, too much information, in any form, isn't easily ingested. You can't

afford to pay homage to everyone else's fifteen minutes of fame. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Television*, Neil Postman observed that with the three words, "And now this...", television news anchors are able to hold your attention while shifting gears 180 degrees.

Radio listenership does not lag either. From 5:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. each weekday in America, listenership far surpasses television viewership. Most people do not know that since television was first introduced, the number of radio stations has increased tenfold, and 97 percent of all households own an average of five radios, not counting their car radios. On weekdays, more than 95 percent of Americans listen to radio for three hours and fourteen minutes. Shock-talk disc jockeys make \$300,000 to \$600,000 per year and more, plus bonuses.

With a planet of more than 5 billion people, American media are easily furnished with an endless supply of turmoil for mass transmission. At any given moment somebody is fomenting revolution somewhere. Such turmoil is packaged daily for the evening news, whose credo has become, "If it bleeds, it leads." We are lured with images of crashes, hostages, and natural disasters. We offer our time and rapt attention to each new hostility, scandal, or disaster. Far more people die annually from choking on food than in plane crashes or by guns, but crashes and shootings make for great footage and play into people's fears.

With its sensationalized trivia, the mass media overglut obscures fundamental issues that *do* merit concern, such as preserving the environment.

Meanwhile, broadcasts themselves regularly imply that it is uncivil or immoral not to tune into the daily news—"all the news you need to know," and "we won't keep you waiting for the latest..." It is *not* immoral to not keep up with the news that is offered. However, tuning out—turning your back on the world—is not appropriate either. Being more selective in what

you give your attention to, and for how long you give it, makes more sense.

Tomorrow, while dressing, rather than plugging in to the mass media, quietly envision how you would like your day to be. Include everything that's important to you. Envision talking with others, making major decisions, having lunch, attending meetings, finishing projects, and walking out in the evening. You'll experience a greater sense of control over aspects of your position that you may have considered uncontrollable.

Only one person controls the volume and frequency of information that you're exposed to. That person is you. As yet, few people are wise information consumers. Each of us needs to guard vigilantly against being deluged with excess data. The notion of keeping up with everything is illusory, frustrating, and self-defeating. The sooner you give it up, the better you'll feel and function.

Keen focus on a handful of priorities has never been more important. Some compelling issues must be given short shrift. Otherwise you run the risk of being overwhelmed by more demanding issues, and *feeling overwhelmed always exacerbates feeling overworked*.

Paper Trails



Paper, paper everywhere but not a thought to think. Imagine staring out the window from the fifth floor of a building and seeing a stack of reports from the ground up to your eye level. This fifty-five-foot high stack would weigh some 659 pounds. *Pulp & Paper* reports that Americans annually consume 659 pounds of paper per person. In Japan, it's only 400 pounds per person; in Europe, Russia, Africa, Australia, and South America, it is far less.

Just like too much information or too many eyewitness reports, dealing with too much paper is going to make you feel overwhelmed and overworked. Americans today are consuming at least three times as much paper

as they were ten years ago. The long-held prediction of paperless offices, for now, is a laugh.

There are two basic reasons why our society spews so much paper:

- We have the lowest postal rates in the world.
- We have the broadest distribution of paper-generating technology.

Last year, Congress received more than 300 million pieces of mail, up from 15 million in 1970. Nationwide, more than 55 million printers are plugged into at least 44 million computers, and annually kick out billions of reams. Are 18,000 sheets enough? Your four-drawer file cabinet, when full, holds 18,000 pages.

The Thoreau Society reports that last year, Henry David Thoreau, who personally has been unable to make any purchases since 1862, received ninety direct mail solicitations at Walden Pond. Under our existing postal rates, catalog publishers and junk mail producers can miss the target 98 percent of the time and still make a profit—*only 2 percent of recipients* need to place an order for a direct mailer to score big.

Direct mailers, attempting to sell more, send you record amounts of unsolicited mail. In 1988, 12 billion catalogs were mailed in the United States, up from 5 billion in 1980. The 1988 mailing equaled 50 catalogs for every man, woman, and child in America. In the last decade, growth in the total volume of regular, third-class bulk mail (junk mail) was thirteen times faster than growth in the population. The typical (overworked? or overwhelmed?) executive receives more than 225 pieces of unsolicited mail each month, or about 12 pieces daily. Even Greenpeace, stalwart protector of the environment, annually sends out 25 million pieces of direct mail.

Attempting to contain the unmanageable, our institutions create paper accounting systems that provide temporary relief and some sense of order, but usually become ingrained and immovable and create more muddle. Certainly, accounting is necessary, but why must it be so complicated?

Because in our overinformed society, reams of data are regarded as a form of protection.

Why is documentation, such as circulating a copy to your boss, so critical to this culture? Because everyone is afraid of getting his derriere roasted. We live in a culture of fear, not like a martial law dictatorship, but a form of fear nonetheless. "If I cannot document or account, I cannot prove or defend myself."

Of the five mega-realities, only paper flow promises to diminish some day as virtual reality, the electronic book, and the gigabyte highway are perfected. For the foreseeable future, you're likely to be up to your eyeballs in paper. *Start where you are.* Clear the in-bins of your desk and your mind. Regard each piece of paper entering your personal domain as a potential mutineer or rebel. Each sheet has to earn its keep and remain worthy of your retention.

An Overabundance of Choices



In 1969, Alvin Toffler predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many choices. He said that this situation would inhibit action, result in greater anxiety, and trigger the perception of less freedom and less time. Having choices is a blessing of a free-market economy. Like too much of anything else, however, having too many choices leads to feeling overwhelmed and results not only in increased time expenditure but also in a mounting form of exhaustion.

Consider the supermarket glut: Gorman's *New Product News* reports that in 1978 the typical supermarket carried 11,767 items. By 1987, that figure had risen to an astounding 24,531 items—more than double in nine years. More than 45,000 other products were introduced during those years, but failed. Elsewhere in the supermarket, Hallmark Cards now offers cards for 105 familial relationships. Currently, more than 1,260 varieties of shampoo and 2,000 skin care

products are on the market. Seventy-five different types of exercise shoes are now available, each with scores of variations in style and features. A *New York Times* article reported that even buying leisure goods has become a stressful, overwhelming experience. Avoid engaging in low-level decisions. If a tennis racquet comes with either a black or brown handle, take the one the clerk hands you.

Whenever you catch yourself about to make a low-level decision, ask yourself: Does this really make a difference? Get in the habit of making *fewer* decisions each day—try to make only ones that count.

A Combined Effect



In a *Time* magazine cover story entitled "Drowsy America," the director of Stanford University's sleep center concluded that, "Most Americans no longer know what it feels like to be fully alert." Lacking a balance between work and play, responsibility and respite, getting things done can become an end-all. We function like human doings instead of human beings. We begin to link executing the items on our growing "to do" lists with feelings of self-worth. As the list grows longer, the constant sense of more to do infiltrates our sense of self-acceptance. What's worse, our entire society seems to be irrevocably headed toward a new epoch of human existence. Is being frantic any way to exist as a nation? Is it any way to run your life?

John Kenneth Galbraith studied poverty-stricken societies on four continents. In *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, he concluded that some societies remain poor (often for centuries) because they accommodate poverty. Although it's difficult to live in abject poverty, Galbraith found that many poor societies are not willing to accept the difficulty of making things better.

Americans appear poised to accept a frenzied, time-pressured existence as if this is the way it has to be. *This is not*

how it has to be. As an author, I have a vision. I see Americans leading balanced lives with rewarding careers, happy homes, and the ability to enjoy themselves. Our ticket to living and working at a comfortable pace lies in our ability to address the true nature of the problem head-on.

The combined effect of the five mega-realities will continue to accelerate the feeling of pressure. Meanwhile, there will continue to be well-intentioned but misdirected voices who choose to condemn employers or Washington, D.C., or what have you for the lack of true leisure in our lives.

A Complete Self



We are, however, forging our own frenetic society. The good news is that the key to forging a more palatable existence belongs to each of us. You, for example, are whole and complete right now, and you can achieve balance in your life. You are not your position. You are not your tasks; they don't define you and they don't constrain you. You have the capacity to acknowledge that your life is finite; you cannot indiscriminately take in the daily deluge that our culture heaps on each of us and expect to feel anything but overwhelmed.

Viewed from the year 2002, the year 1992 will seem a period of relative calm and stability when life moved at a manageable pace. When your days on earth are over and the ledger of your life is examined, the big auditor in the sky will be upset if you *didn't* take enough breaks, and if you didn't enjoy yourself.

Recognize that from now on, you will face an *ever-increasing* array of items competing for your attention. Each of the five mega-realities will proliferate in the 1990s. You *cannot handle everything*, nor is it desirable to try. It is time to make compassionate though difficult choices about what is best ignored versus what merits your attention and action. ●