

OVERWORKED OR OVERWHELMED?

This is the second part of an article on ever-increasing burdens on association executives and others in today's world of work.

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

Paper, paper, everywhere but not a thought to think. Imagine staring out a fifth floor window and seeing a stack of reports from the ground up to your eye level. This 55-foot high stack would weigh some 659 pounds. *Pulp & Paper* reports that Americans annually consume 659 pounds of paper per person, but for AENC members the figure is likely to be 1000 pounds or more.

In Japan, it's only 400 pounds per person; in Europe, Russia, Africa, Australia, and South America, far less. Similar to too much information, having too much paper to deal with is going to make you feel overwhelmed, and overworked. You likely are consuming at least three times as much paper as 10 years ago. The long held prediction of paperless offices, for now, is a laugher.

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

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

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

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—It is essential to clear the in-bins of your mind and your desk. 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 Over-abundance of Choices

In 1969, Alvin Toffler predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many choices, and that this would inhibit action, result in greater anxiety, and trigger the perception of less freedom and less time. Like too much of everything else, however, having too many choices leads the feeling of being overwhelmed and results in increased time expenditure and 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. A *New York Times* article reported that even buying leisure time goods has become a stressful, overwhelming experience.

And you? You currently have enough insurance proposals, speaker literature, software guides, telephone service options, and office supply catalogs to last you for a lifetime! Oh, if we could but choose from what we have.

Periodically, the sweetest choice is choosing from what you already have, choosing to actually have what you've already chosen. More important is to avoid engaging in low level decisions. If your meeting planner asks you to choose between a hotel meal plan that comes

with either a two-desert option versus three, at the same price, and it's of no concern to you or your attendees, don't decide—hand it back.

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

A Combined Effect

The director of Stanford University's sleep center says, "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 act 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 gets longer, the lingering 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 frantic, however, any way to exist as a nation? Is it any way to run your life?

We appear poised to accommodate a frenzied, time-pressured existence, as if this is the way it has to be and always has been. *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 home lives, and the ability to enjoy themselves. Our ticket to living and working at a comfortable pace is to not accommodate a way of being that doesn't support us, and addressing 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, well-intentioned but misdirected voices will choose to condemn "the board," "the association members," or "Washington DC," or what have you for the lack of balance in our lives.

A Complete Self

We are, however, forging our own frenetic society. Nevertheless, the very good news is that the key to

forging a more palatable existence can occur one by one. 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 next task; it need not define you or constrain you.

You also 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 2002, 1992 will appear as a period of relative calm and stability when life moved at a manageable pace. When your days on earth are over and the big auditor in the sky examines the ledger of your life, she'll be upset if you *didn't* take enough breaks, and if you didn't enjoy yourself.

On a deeply felt personal level, recognize that from now on, whether or not you retire from association

management, you will face an *ever-increasing* array of items competing for your attention. Each of the five mega-realities will proliferate in the '90's. You *cannot handle everything*, nor is making the attempt desirable. It is time to make compassionate though difficult choices about what is best ignored, versus what does merit your attention and action.

*Jeff Davidson, a professional speaker based in Chapel Hill, and new AENC member, wrote **Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace In a Sped-Up Society** (MasterMedia, \$10.95) and can be reached directly at (800) 735-1994.*