

OVERWORKED or OVERWHELMED?

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

Here is a multiple-choice quiz question.

Which word best describes association executives today:

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

The best 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 as if they are all part of a ever-lengthening to-do list, to be handled during days that race by.

To say that association executives work too many hours, and that too much work is at the root of the time-pressure you are now feeling, is to miss the convergence of larger, more fundamental issues. You could handle the slightly longer work week than that of five years ago. It's everything else competing for your attention that leaves you feeling overwhelmed. Once overwhelmed, the feeling of overworked quickly follows.

Nearly every aspect of our society and our lives have become more complex even since the mid-1980s. Traveling has become more cumbersome. Learning new ways of record keeping, maintaining membership numbers, and staying "current" takes its toll. Merely participating as a functioning member of society guarantees that your day, week, month, year and life, and your physical, emotional, and spiritual energy will be depleted without the proper vantage point from which to approach each day and conduct your life.

Do you personally know anyone in association management who consistently has unscheduled, free stretches? Five factors, or "mega-realities," are simultaneously contributing to the perceptual and actual erosion of leisure time among Americans in general, and association executives in particular, including:

- _ Population growth;
- _ An expanding volume of knowledge;
- _ Mass media growth and electronic addiction;
- _ The paper trail culture; and
- _ An over-abundance of choices.



Jeff Davidson is an author and speaker from Chapel Hill.

Population Growth

From the beginning of creation to 1850 A.D. world population grew to one billion. It grew to two billion by 1930, three billion by 1960, four billion by 1979, and five billion by 1987, with six billion en route. Every 33 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 260,000 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, the environment and all living things. This is the most compelling aspect of our existence, and will be linked momentarily to the four other mega-realities.

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 grow faster than our ability to repair highways, bridges and arteries. In fact, vehicles (primarily cars) are multiplying twice as fast as people, currently approaching 400,000,000 vehicles, compared to 165,000,000 registered motorists.

In whatever cities you'r next hundred meetings are going to be held consider this: national urban planners report that

there will be no clear solution to gridlock for decades—not just auto gridlock, air traffic as well. Moreover, all population studies reveal that our nation's metropolitan areas will become home to an even greater percentage of the population. If only the gridlock were confined to commuter arteries. However, shoppers, vacationers, even campers—everyone in motion is or will be feeling its effects.

Knowledge Growth

This moment, you, and everyone in association management is being bombarded on all sides. 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.

Increasingly, there is no body of knowledge that everyone can be expected to know. In its 140th year, for example, the Smithsonian Museum 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.

With more information comes more misinformation, marginally useful information and information that's downright difficult to deal with. Impossible to understand airlines promotions, insurance policies, and VCR instructions all contribute to one's immobility.

Media Growth

The effect of the mass media on our lives continues unchecked. In America, more than three out of five television households own VCRs, while the number of movie tickets sold and videos rented in the U.S. each exceeded one billion annually starting in 1988. More than 575 motion pictures are produced each year compared to an average of 175 twelve years ago. In 1972, three major television networks dominated television—ABC, NBC and CBS. There are now 339 full-power independent television stations and many cable TV subscribers receive up to 140 channels offering more than 72,000 shows per month. In a few years, 1,000 channels will be available.

All told, the average American spends more than eight solid 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 data, in any form, isn't easily ingested. You can't afford to pay homage to everyone else's 15 minutes of fame.

Radio power

Radio listenership does not lag either. From 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. each weekday in America, listenership far surpasses that of television viewership. Unknown to most people, since television was first introduced, the number of radio stations has increased tenfold.

The broadcasts 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 to "tune out"—turn your back on the world—is not appropriate either. Being more selective in what you give your attention to, and to 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 largely uncontrollable.

There is only one party who 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 vigilantly guard against being deluded with excess data. The notion of "keeping up" with everything is illusory and self-defeating. The sooner you give it up the better you'll feel and function.

Keep focus on a handful of priorities has never been more important. Yes, 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.

Next month — Davidson explains how to deal with the many choices offered in today's world.

