

Unlimited Potential

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Newsletter

Information Overload: Taming the Electronic Beasts

Frantic, forgetful, fragmented and flummoxed. Does this describe you or someone you work with? If so, you're not alone. Many smart leaders are being swept up by today's frenetic, globalized, technology-driven lifestyle.

We have plunged into a mad rush of activity, aided by high-speed Internet, cell phones, instant messaging, BlackBerries and email 24/7. We work longer hours, with escalating demands.

We expect our brains to keep track of more than they can handle, and then find ourselves losing and forgetting things—impatient, anxious, worried and plagued by short attention spans. We're caught in a frenzy, frustrated and often furious.

Modern work life, for all of its timesaving conveniences, is sapping our creativity, humanity, joy and, occasionally, our sense of humor. It's time to stop and look at what's happening.

The speed of our lives threatens to destroy our most important connections. Unless we deliberately set aside time for what matters most, the quality of our personal and professional lives will erode. When this happens, we find ourselves less energetic, optimistic and enthusiastic than before—and we don't even know why. We may think we are just too busy or disorganized, or ascribe it to growing older—or simply to life itself.

"The true culprit is neither disorganization nor any of the other possible culprits just mentioned. It is that you have neglected what matters most to you. In today's world you must deliberately preserve and cultivate your most valuable connections to people, activities and what is most important to you."—Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, *CrazyBusy*, Ballantine Books, 2006



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ADD Nation?

Since the mid-1990s, people have increasingly complained of being chronically inattentive, disorganized and overbooked. Most complaints originate from individuals who do not have clinical diagnoses of attention deficit disorder (ADD). Instead, they suffer from what ADD expert Dr. Hallowell calls “severe cases of modern life”—a condition he dubs *Attention Deficit Traits* (ADT). It’s an epidemic in many corporate cultures that promote a fast multitasking environment.

ADT sufferers have an environmentally induced attention deficit, he asserts—a phenomenon he describes as the “F-state”: frantic, frenzied, forgetful, flummoxed, frustrated and fragmented.

The faster we go, the more we take on. The more we take on, the more there is to do. Laborsaving devices create more labor. By shortening the time and energy required to complete any one task, these devices free us to do more.

Organizations are sacrificing their most valuable asset—namely, the imagination and creativity of the “brains” they employ—by allowing ADT to infect the organization. It’s not that hard to eradicate the problem once you identify it. But it may be difficult to convince people to abandon a habit that initially feels satisfying: over activity.

Adrenaline Rush

For many people, working in the F-state is fun. Using email, BlackBerries and other devices provides constant stimulation. Some people enjoy the adrenaline surge: Doing everything faster feels exciting. We fuel our brains with caffeine to experience a rush and sharpen the edge. The number of available energy drinks laced with caffeine has dramatically increased in the last three years.

But living life faster and coveting more data won’t increase your sense of fulfillment. While these behaviors may temporarily charge your emotional battery and get your energy flowing, they won’t deepen your connections to what really matters.

We take on too much because we like the stimulation and attention that accompany being wanted and needed by others. We create the overload we complain about and crave it when faced with moments of stillness.

When the brain is stimulated by crisis, it goes into problem-solving mode, with mental blasts of energy

and focus.

But when such stimulation is prolonged, and unresolved, our brain chemistry becomes less effective. Its centers of executive functioning, where decisions are made, are less likely to detect shades of gray. We’re then prone to narrow, black-and-white thinking. Our more primitive emotional centers of the brain kick in, triggering the fight-or-flight response, and we’re determined to slay the metaphorical tiger.

Translated to the workplace, this is what happens when leaders are on overload, resorting to quick decisions that bring only short-term relief. Their centers of rational intelligence are hijacked by the primitive desire to win at all cost.

When you’re in a state of high-level fear, your brain goes into survival mode. On the most basic physiological level, its lower centers “recruit” its higher centers to protect you from being killed. Adrenaline and cortisol flood your system, and you go into linear (black and white) thinking, with decreased mental flexibility, impaired critical-thinking skills and more uncertainty.

You lose your sense of humor and are unable to entertain new ideas. You simply want to “fix it” (whatever “it” is), lest you be annihilated. This is fine if you’re being chased by a saber tooth tiger, but it’s inappropriate if you’re sitting at your desk.

Organizational Deficit Disorder

One side effect of a frenzied pace is disorganization. We cannot keep up with all of the data and piles of paper we accumulate to stay informed. We become buried in clutter.

This tendency has given rise to a new breed of specialists: professional organizers. The occupation is populated by experts, speakers, authors and gurus who promote the art and science of getting organized.

A recent search on Amazon.com returned 2,718 books on getting organized, with 300 devoted to conquering clutter. A Google search yielded 15.2 million entries for getting organized and 4.6 million for clutter. But getting organized is like dieting: You won’t achieve happiness just because you do it.

Disorganization is a symptom—not the core problem. Getting organized may alleviate surface pain, but it doesn’t address the root cause. Sure, we can all benefit from being more organized and getting a handle on time management, but the issues run deeper than simply clearing off our desk or emptying our inbox.

Human Deficit Disorder

Too much electronic time, coupled with a dearth of human moments, leads to an as-yet-unnamed medical condition. Symptoms include loss of personal vitality, an inability to converse, a craving for a computer screen when we're separated from one and low-grade depression. For those who tend to be introverts, online communication becomes preferable to face-to-face interactions.

Email communication is a poor substitute for authentic human interaction. Electronic messages lack what makes communication interesting and emotional. We send an email because a phone conversation requires too much time, energy and complexity.

Positive human-to-human contact reduces blood levels of the stress hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol. When we spend most of our time online or communicating via email, our brains are not exposed to the stimuli that trigger the release of mood-boosting hormones like oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine and serotonin. They are known to enhance trust, bonding, attention and pleasure. Serotonin reduces fear and worry. And while face-to-face interactions do, indeed, take more time, they provide longer-lasting effects.

Sadly, however, most companies are reducing travel and meeting time in favor of electronic communication. At the end of the day, the time spent interacting with others is greatly reduced. While we may produce more in less time, we're faced with a gnawing feeling of emptiness and lack of fulfillment.

What companies fail to realize is that the bonds that form from human connections are critical to peak performance. If they're not firmly in place, commitment and motivation suffer—especially in virtual teams. The value of face-to-face meetings, even when travel is involved, sometimes outweighs the benefits of technological convenience.

What Leaders Can Do

All too often, companies cause Attention Deficit Traits in their work groups by demanding fast, rather than deep, thinking. Most firms encourage employees to work on multiple overlapping projects and initiatives, resulting in second-rate thinking.

Even worse, companies that ask their people to do too much at one time reward those who say yes to overload and punish those who choose to focus by

saying no. Some organizational cultures are overly infatuated with fast-acting individuals who multitask and work long hours, often to their personal—and the company's—detriment.

Pressures to cut costs frequently prompt companies to lay off support staff, which forces managers to handle their own administrative work. This is a mistake that has severe economic consequences, as companies end up losing money in the long term. The more time managers spend on clerical tasks, the less effective they are at completing the important work of moving the organization forward.

Firms that ignore ADT symptoms in their employees will suffer its ill effects: People underachieve, create clutter, cut corners, make careless mistakes and squander their brainpower. As demands continue to mount, a toxic, high-pressure culture produces high illness and turnover rates.

Firms can invest in amenities that contribute to a positive atmosphere, such as child care and gym facilities. While this may seem like a luxury, companies like the SAS Institute in North Carolina ultimately save money on recruitment, training and severance expenses.

Matching Skills to Tasks

Leaders can help prevent a culture of ADT by matching employees' skills to tasks. When managers assign goals that stretch people too far or ask them to focus on tasks for which they're not trained, stress escalates. Understanding an employee's cognitive and emotional style—and using this knowledge to identify the right jobs and tasks—is more than good management; it's an excellent way to boost worker productivity and morale.

Leaders should also recognize and reward people for creativity. They can encourage “downtime” or thinking time. If managers prohibit employees from taking the time to stop and think, they're not getting optimum brainpower.

More Solutions

No one would suggest surrendering today's labor-saving devices and Internet/email convenience. Most people, however, need a system to stay on top of what matters most. With a plan, you can reap technology's benefits without falling victim to distractions, information overload and multitasking chaos. (For more suggestions, continue reading the back page.)

Taming the Electronic Beasts

It is easy to use and perhaps become addicted to electronic email and web-based applications—to the detriment of human interactions and relationships. This leads to overload and overwhelm. Dr. Hallowell includes a list of suggestions to control Attention Deficit Traits in his article, “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform” (*Harvard Business Review*, January 2005).

At Work

- Do all you can to create a trusting, connected work environment.
- Have a friendly, face-to-face talk with a person you like every four to six hours.
- Break large tasks into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Keep a section of your workspace or desk clear at all times.
- Each day, reserve some “think time” that’s free from appointments, email and phone calls.
- Set aside email until you’ve completed at least one or two more important tasks.
- Before you leave work each day, create a list of three to five items you will attend to the next day.
- Try to act on, file or toss every document you touch. Don’t let papers accumulate.
- Pay attention to the times of day when you’re at your best. Do your most important work then, and save the rote work for periods when you’re less focused or energized.
- Do whatever it takes to work in a more focused way. Add background music, take short breaks or take a walk—whatever works best for you.
- Ask a colleague or assistant to help you stop talking on the telephone, emailing or working too late.
- Recognize and correct your nonproductive habits.

When You Feel Overwhelmed

- Slow down.
- Complete an easy rote task: Reset your watch, write a note about a neutral topic, read a few dictionary definitions, or make a dent in a crossword puzzle.
- Move around: Go up and down a flight of stairs, or walk briskly.
- Ask for help, delegate a task, or brainstorm with a colleague. In short, do not worry alone.

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