

Preserving Productivity Under Information Overload

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Are you old enough to remember when mail arrived once a day and that was it? Were you alive when if the phone rang and there was no one to answer it, it was like a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it?

Are you now so fully plugged in to communication technologies that it's unsettling to turn your cell phone off, and if your internet connection is down, you're pacing the floor wondering what might be happening that you haven't heard about? When you're working at your computer is it hard to keep yourself from repeatedly checking e-mails and going on-line to see the latest news, sports, stock prices, gossip, or You-tube entries?

If so, you're not alone. There is growing recognition that our technological gadgets that once were heralded as miraculous productivity-enhancers and time-savers, come with a common side-effect: they repeatedly distract us from the work that we need or want to do, and make it harder and harder to concentrate.

A recent *New York Times* article highlighted the fact that some of the biggest technology firms, including Intel, Google, and IBM are noticing that frequent phone calls, e-mails, instant messaging and web surfing are reducing productivity.

Reports by research group Basex (with titles like *Information Overload: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us* and *The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity*) estimate that unnecessary interruptions (like instant messaging, spam, e-mail, phone calls, and the web) cost U. S. businesses 28 billion man hours and \$650 billion per year. They also argue that 28% of each knowledge worker's day may be lost to unnecessary interruptions.

Tech giant Intel has even experimented with "less communication" periods to see if changes would help. In one pilot study, a group of engineers and managers set aside Tuesday morning "Quiet Time," with no phone, IM, or e-mail, and a "do not disturb" sign on their doors – and reported "markedly positive results" in terms of "employee effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of life."

Tony Wright, Co-Founder of RescueTime (specializing in time-management software), calls the barrage of personalized messages coming at us "infoporn," and sees its increase as a "looming disaster." Likening the problem to other addictions, he concludes:

... as I watch very smart people fall prey to the attention-vultures, I think I'm more and more convinced that a concerted and scientific attack on the pleasure centers of our monkey brains will win the day.

This may be a bit hyperbolic, but I agree that our increasing dependence on information from our electronic gadgets behaves as something of an addiction. And as with any addiction, people are not likely to change their habits unless they see real problems with their behaviors and clear benefits from change.

One approach I think will help is to provide creative workers with recent findings in neuroscience. Studies using fMRI to demonstrate which parts of the brain function under different tasks and inputs are very revealing of how the mind works -- how the brain responds to multiple, successive inputs, how multitasking is a myth, and what the brain looks like when real creative insights are being achieved.

With this type of knowledge, workers may be motivated to make the corrective moves for both their creative productivity and their sanity.

References

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