

# White Paper on the Road to Overcoming Overload

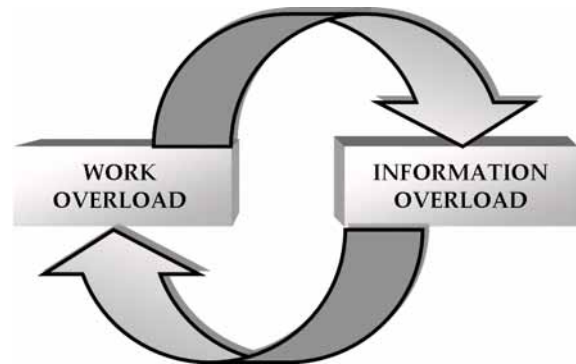


## Overcoming Telephone Overload

### Background

*How Can You Control The Floodgates That Overload Your World?* Martin Luther told us, “I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off.” Using practical thoughts and tips we will show you how to control the sources of overload.

In a knowledge based economy, leaders and knowledge workers face a highly interdependent relationship between work overload and information overload. Here, our objective is to help you identify the sources of information overload and control them. We believe that as you manage the sources of information overload you can control work overload as a natural by-product.



As knowledge workers, information enters your world in various ways. The most common are: **e-mail, telephone, paper, and meetings** including one-on-one encounters and **interruptions**. In the coming chapters we will provide some thoughts and tips on how to deal practically and easily with each of these.

Just as with previous sections of this book, please note that we are not presenting a program or a system but a set of “Lego” building blocks. Select what is most appropriate for you and what you can adapt to suit your own needs and style. There will always be exceptions to every rule. Do not let concerns for the exceptions direct and limit your thinking or your personal search for solutions.

Our minds have an amazing capacity to capture images and events and to retain them. Our minds can be likened to a camera that is always on. Everything that comes into our world through our senses is captured and stored indefinitely. The more we focus on an issue, data, or

#### Note:

\* This whitepaper is extracted from our book *Overloaded? From overload to balanced living*. See inside the book at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

\* If this page was sent to you by a friend we invite you to subscribe to our e-letter “On The Road To Overcoming Overload.” Please go to <http://www.nomoreoverload.com/request.asp>



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image, the deeper it is ingrained in our minds. Each of these exposures consumes mental energy and occupies storage space in our brain.

*As another illustration, our minds are also like a disk drive on a computer. Scientists believe that even before our birth the mind captures sounds and memories of the world around us. This continues without ever deleting anything. Over time our data storage becomes crowded and overloaded. Regretfully, science has not found any delete buttons allowing us to purge our brains of unnecessary clutter.*

One of the symptoms of information overload is difficulty in recalling people's names and details. While aging may be a factor, a key reason is our overcrowded minds. Just like accessing data on a heavily loaded disk drive or finding a document in a disorganized filing cabinet, recalling details from the vast quantity of data stored in our minds takes time and mental energy. This explains the reason why small children can recall details faster than older people. This happens primarily because their storage banks are still uncluttered by the huge amount of exposures accumulated with every passing year.

### **So what can you do?**

Hundreds of years ago Martin Luther said, "I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off."<sup>1</sup> Just as you can prevent flying birds from making a nest in your hair you can prevent information exposure from settling in your mind **by tackling it at the source**. Our strategy for controlling the information overload is to attack the sources of unnecessary information before they cement their exposure taking more space and mental energy.

In the coming sections we will give tips for each of the five information sources we referred to earlier. But before we do this, let us share four common tips that apply to all of them. Later, we will highlight these common tips giving you examples of how they apply in your day-to-day life.

**First Common Tip: Define your communication protocol** and communicate it to your important people. What do we mean by a communication protocol? A protocol is an expected code of conduct or behavior that governs our interactions. For example, when you meet someone in the morning you expect him or her to give a greeting such as "Good morning". If you invite someone to a meeting you expect him or her to attend or express regrets. In years past, when you called someone's office you expected a person to answer the phone. That was in the past. Now, the protocol has changed. Today, more likely, you expect to leave a message on a telephone

### **Ancient Answers to the Information Overload Problem**

**About 1000 BC** – King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said "Be warned: there is no end of opinions ready to be expressed. Studying them can go on forever and become very exhausting!"

Ecclesiastes: 12:12

**About 60 - 65 AD** – Saint Paul instructs his student, Timothy, saying, "Avoid the idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge."

<sup>1</sup>Timothy: 6:20

answering machine hoping that your call will be returned. If there is no answering machine you feel disappointed or frustrated because your communication protocol has been violated.

From the preceding examples, you will note that, in the absence of agreed-upon standards or social norms, protocol is largely defined by the expectations of the originator. Such expectations may not be compatible with your circumstances and life priorities. Therefore, it is important to define a personal communication protocol compatible with your high value roles. This protocol should be based on reasonable priorities and expectations. To avoid any misunderstanding this protocol should be clearly communicated to your important people.

**Second Common Tip: Seek the support of your important people for your new communication protocol.** If you have ever tried dieting or losing weight you know that this requires commitment and discipline. You also know that success in such disciplines is made easier when you have the support of the important people in your life. Overcoming overload in an overloaded world is not easy. Overcoming information and work addiction will require changed attitudes and priorities that are made easier if you have the support of your important people.

*Your new communication protocols will most likely result in changed behavior. Change is often difficult especially if it requires modified behavior on the part of others. With this in view, it is critical that you negotiate for the support of your important people as you implement your new communication protocol.*

**Third Common Tip: Batch process because this is more efficient.** Years back computer memory and processing power were very expensive. Programmers were very careful not to be wasteful in the use of system resources. As a result, systems were programmed and used in a batch-processing mode. As technology became more abundant and cheap we moved to a high demand, multitasking processing environment. This is often wasteful and less efficient in terms of system resource utilization.

Regretfully, our human mind has a finite capacity. Being stretched and overtaxed we need to move back to a more efficient processing model - batch processing. Try it. You will like it.

The concept of “Batch Processing” is to group similar functions into one common, easy to administer process. This common process helps you concentrate on one type of activity at a time. This, by nature, allows the mind to focus and be more efficient. As you practice batch processing, you become better at estimating the amount of time required to complete such activities. You become better at completing tasks on schedule. This will enhance your confidence and your effectiveness. In the following chapters we will give you examples of how to batch process e-mail, phone calls, paper and even meetings and interruptions.

**Fourth Common Tip: Make it a habit; it becomes easier.** Those of us who commit to an exercise program know that once it becomes a habit it becomes much easier to keep and maintain. Habits, good or bad, are hard to break. You will also find that others are less likely to challenge you or tempt you to return to your overloaded behavior. People admire and respect disciplined individuals. Good habits communicate consistency and stability that result in an

element of security and self-confidence. Good habits will help you feel more in control and reduce the feeling of anxiety that result from our overloaded world.

In the coming sections we will encourage you to develop habitual routines to batch process your e-mail, voice mail, paper and even meetings. Developing a pattern of behavior is healthy and less stressful for you. As a side benefit, you will become more predictable to your team and to those who interact with you regularly.

### Summary

- ✓ There are many thoughts and tips that can help you control the sources of work and information overload. Always make sure to personalize the suggested solutions in response to your high value roles, goals, and activities as well as the important people in your life.
- ✓ There are four common tips for handling information sources:
  1. Always seek to define your personal communication protocol and communicate it to your important people.
  2. Seek the support of your important people for your new protocol.
  3. Batch process your information input; it is more efficient and uses less mental and emotional resources.
  4. Whenever possible, make your input processing habitual. This will make the application of new disciplines easier.
- ✓ **Please note:** This section will be of particular value to those who had a high score in the Statements 8 to 14 of the [Effectiveness and Overload Gauge](#)

## Overcoming Telephone Overload

*Thoughts and Tips* are provided to help you improve your communication and avoid phone tag while reversing the negative impact of phone overload.

**W**hen Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876 he launched a communications revolution. In his wildest imagination Mr. Bell could not have imagined the impact his invention would bring. The telephone has become the most common communication tool in the world. Ease of access and good quality have made it a favorite with young and old alike.

Today we are all expected to have at least one phone at home and at work. Even in remote communities the use of mobile phones has become commonplace. In the office world the telephone is a prerequisite for every knowledge worker. Additional features such as call forwarding, conferencing, call waiting, and message waiting add flexibility and complexity of a system that has become mandatory for business communications. Regretfully, few individuals take time to fully learn the effective use of this common tool.

Today business leaders spend 10-50 % of their time in communicating on the telephone. Business managers have an average of three telephone numbers to their names. Along with paging systems each of these is associated with voice mailboxes that need to be checked and maintained on a regular basis. The incessant ring of the telephone demands your attention diverting your interest from other important tasks.

Telephone and voice mail anxiety are common complaints in social circles. Alexander Graham Bell invented a tool to serve modern man. Today the servant tool has become a taskmaster that is driving many to distress and distraction. Let's take back control.

### **TIPS: What can you do?**

Whether your organization has a phone policy or not, you are responsible for what you can control. Here are some tips that you can consider and tailor to your own needs: <sup>ii</sup>, <sup>iii</sup>, <sup>iv</sup>

#### **A. Define your phone protocol and communicate it to your callers using your outgoing message.**

- Keep your recorded greeting clear and brief. Clearly include your name, date as well as your voice mail handling protocol. Indicating the conditions that will govern your reply will help set realistic expectations for the caller and will avoid disappointments on his or her part.
- Encourage callers to leave a message that requires a specific response or action. Explain that if they do, you will give their message priority. If a caller explains specifically what is expected, you will be better prepared to respond and may avoid phone tag or back and forth phone calls.

- If possible, change your greeting daily.
- If you are going to be away for more than a day, tell callers that you will have limited access to your voice mail and you may not be able to respond in a timely manner.
- Be sure to speak at a speed that enables the caller to record needed details.
- For security reasons, avoid telling callers you are “out of town.”



**EXAMPLE:** The following is an example of an outgoing voice mail message that you can modify to your role and corporate culture.

*Thank you for calling (state your full name) of (state organization) on this (state day and date)*

*I will give your call priority if you leave me detailed instructions on how I can best serve you.*

*I try to return my priority calls within (X) working hours. If you need immediate service, please call (state alternate and state extension)*

*Thank you.*

**Sample Verbs List**

- Agree
- Analyze
- Announce
- Approve
- Assign
- Clarify
- Decide
- Define
- Delegate
- Determine
- Develop
- Discuss
- Evaluate
- Explore
- Identify
- Learn
- Plan
- Present
- Prioritize
- Report
- Request
- Review
- Summarize
- Write

**B. Batch process your return voice mails efficiently**

- Whenever appropriate, screen all calls and return phone calls en masse at a regularly planned time each day. Remember your outgoing voice message has set the caller expectations. Try to keep your commitment.
- If possible, use the auto reply feature on your phone system. This feature leads you directly into the caller’s mailbox where you can leave a message and avoid lengthy discussions. This could save you one to three minutes per call.
- As you listen to the incoming message, write a brief note in your notepad along with your expected reply.
- Remember “OHIO”, “**Only Handle It Once**”, if you can.
- Apply the **4 D’s** - **D**elete with it now, **D**eal with it now, **D**elegate it now, and **D**iarize your planned or expected action. In this case be sure to let the caller know your expected action date.

- When you receive a batch of voice mail messages, prioritize them. Focus on your important people first. Avoid responding based on urgency only.
- If you must call a known “chatterbox”, place your call right before lunch or at the end of the day. This will likely keep the conversation brief.
- Do not offer peoples’ phone numbers to strangers.

### **C. Reduce time spent on telephone calls**

- Have a mini agenda for your call. This could save you at least five minutes per call. This agenda should have:
  - ✓ One primary objective and if you must, a secondary objective. Avoid putting too many objectives or conflicting objectives on one phone call for this will dilute your focus. A clear statement of objective should start with an active verb. (For example, confirm the need for a meeting).
  - ✓ State clear outcome expectations or what is to be accomplished. Start these with an active verb as well. (For example: 1) Discuss alternative to meeting, and 2) agree on follow-up activities)
  - ✓ Leave a clear time expectation for the callback or response.
- If receiving a call, help the caller identify the agenda quickly by asking “What can I do for you?” or “What is the most important point you want me to learn?”
- Keep the conversation focused. Use your agenda to bring the conversation back to the subject under discussion.
- If you have need for constant communications on small matters with the same individuals, use a sheet or a log in which you record thoughts that you need to discuss with such people. Jot down your thoughts as they occur to you. This will form an agenda for your next phone call and reduce the number of calls you make. This will not only save you considerable calling time but will reduce the number of times you need to interrupt the other party. If you train the other party to do the same this will reduce the number of times he or she interrupts you.
- Try standing up when you talk on the phone. This keeps you “on your toes” and will reduce your call time.
- Watch your voice quality and tone. If you are stressed, the caller will detect that in your voice. The person will keep you on the phone longer, demand more detail, and may call you back for reassurance. A warm, crisp tone will make the caller trust your competence and shorten the length of your call. Smiling and lifting your voice at the end of a question will help.

- End the phone call by talking in past tense. Begin by summarizing the call and the follow-up action and promises. Then say, “It was nice to talk with you! Thank you, good-bye!”
- Unplanned phone calls can be classified as interruptions. Handle them firmly and politely. Ask to schedule a time that is convenient to both of you.
- Make the best of your voice mail. Don’t let the phone dictate the priorities of your life. Feel free to let your voice mail pick up the call or screen your calls via the digital display.

### D. Leave a good voice mail message

- Think about your message before you call. In today’s business you are more likely to get a voice mail than the person you are calling. So always be prepared by having a clear agenda before you dial a number. This agenda will have:
  - ✓ Appropriate professional greetings using the recipient’s name
  - ✓ Identification of yourself and your organization, if needed.
  - ✓ Day and time of call, if needed
  - ✓ The objective of your call starting with an active verb
  - ✓ Brief explanation or expected action or request
  - ✓ Summary of point discussed or objective
  - ✓ In closing, state your name and end with your phone number. Remember that the **listener needs time to process the information and write it down**. Be sure to provide a half second pause as you are saying your telephone number. "My number is 212 (pause), 123 (pause), 3456."
- Avoid telephone tag. Give the listener options. Tell him or her when you can best be reached to prevent frustration.
- Where possible, provide the person you are calling with the option of not returning your call. For example, indicate that if you do not hear from them by a certain time you will assume a certain reply. (For example, “Jim, if I do not hear from you by 8AM I assume our meeting is confirmed as planned for 1 PM)
- Do not ask for a return phone call unless you have a very compelling reason for your call to be returned. Always assume that the person you are calling is very busy. Ask yourself, “**Why would he or she want to call me back?**” Be sure you have a good answer that is not only based on your needs or wants.
- Don't leave repeat messages. Your second call is no more likely to be returned than your first. Try sending e-mail instead or speak to someone else in the organization.
- Telephones distort high frequency sounds such as "f" and "s". Pronounce word endings and do not swallow syllables.

- Watch your tone. Without other non-verbal cues such as body language, your tone is all you have to communicate with. Put vitality in your voice. A monotone lacks enthusiasm. Stand up and smile as you leave your message. Standing will increase your energy, and people can hear a smile over the phone. Smiling conveys warmth. Avoid sarcasm and irritation if you want your call returned. Keep an even temper and state your request.
- Modulate your volume. A voice that is too loud is irritating. A soft voice will not always be heard and the listener will miss vital information. Stand or sit up straight and speak directly into the receiver. Do not cradle the phone in your neck or use a speakerphone.
- If you are angry or have something bad to say, do not leave it on a voice mail. Face to face dialogue is more effective.



While talking on the phone I often found myself tempted to do other things at the same time. I thought I was being more productive by say, answering my e-mail or reviewing correspondence. I must admit in doing so I was not giving due attention to the other party on the phone.

It shocked me to realize that, whether by the clicks of the keyboard or the number of times I asked them to repeat what they said, this distraction was noticeable to the other parties and understandably, offensive. It became obvious to me that this common behavior is not appropriate. So I made a simple change that removed this temptation. I placed my computer on the desk in front of me and my phone on the table behind me. This simple change has had a very positive impact on the quality of my phone communications. I highly recommend this.

**Ms. Andrea Seymour, Vice President and Chief Information Officer**

### Summary

- ✓ Define a phone communication protocol that is compatible with your most important roles and communicate it using your outgoing voice message.
- ✓ Seek the support of your important people for your protocol.
- ✓ Batch process your incoming voice mail applying the OHIO (Only Handle It Once) principle as well as the 4 D's - (Delete it now, Deal with it now, Delegate it now, Diarize it now).
- ✓ Reduce the time spent on the phone by having a good reason for the call and a well-planned agenda.
- ✓ Leave good voice mail messages that define expectations and reduce the possibilities of prolonged phone tag and miscommunication.
- ✓ If you want your phone calls to be returned you must have a very compelling reason for your call to be returned.
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<sup>i</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*. Volume 21. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), page 88.

<sup>ii</sup> Ann Massie Nelson, "Voice Mail Puts Onus on Lawyer to Respond." <http://www.wisbar.org/wislawmag/1997/09/risk.html> (18 October 2001).

<sup>iii</sup> Laura M. Stack, "Taming the Telephone." <http://www.theproductivitypro.com/newsletters/newsletter10.htm> (15 January 2002).

<sup>iv</sup> Laura M. Stack, "Voice Mail Tips." <http://www.theproductivitypro.com/newsletters/Number%202%20March%201999.htm> (16 June 2004).