

4 Techniques to prevent drowning from Information Overload

Okay! Enough Already!

Just over 20 years ago, I graduated university and had the world at my doorstep. There was so much opportunity in 1987 that I didn't know which path to pursue...so I went to Europe for a few months.

When I returned, and started working, I was told that I should read more. One of my first bosses told me that the answer to every question I ever had was written in a book somewhere. It was up to me to find it, and to apply it to my life.

In 1987, it was the thrill of the hunt.

This was discouraging because there were so many books, and I thought the learning part of my life was over. I'd just finished years and years of education, and was eager to start living, and to stop learning.

I've since realized that living and learning go hand in hand. Like every vegetable, plant and animal on this earth, human beings have an innate desire to grow, and learning encourages growth.

Through the years, I've continued to learn, and I've continued to live. I've consumed information, and I've distributed information in an effort to improve the human race, and the lives of those I've touched. I've traveled to many ends of the earth, and I've enjoyed many adventures for which I shall forever be grateful.

Learning, as far as I see it, is the seeking out and acquisition of new information, and then using critical thinking to decide how to apply it to our lives.

This applies to business leaders on both a personal and professional level.

Businesses need to periodically seek out new information, and then use critical thinking to decide how to apply it.

In the last few years, though, this information has exploded at us from all directions.

Been there, done that.

We, as a society, and as a business community, are better off to have a large number of people who have been there and done that to help us avoid mistakes and to get to the place we want to be quicker. Don't we?

Now, the acquisition of information 20 years ago was much harder than it is today. 10 years ago, information was becoming much more prevalent as the world wide web became mainstream, and information became easier to obtain.

In 1997, many answers were easy to find.

But look at the information universe today!

The answer to any business question you may have is probably detailed on the web in at least 100 places, if not more.

In the past 20 years, we have changed from a society that needs to find innovative ways to seek out and find information, into a society that needs to find innovative ways to think critically about the information available, and to apply that information to our lives.

In 2008, we need to be able to fully understand the question we're asking, and then be able to discern between multiple answers to the question.

Information is everywhere, but why is good information so hard to find?

Some say we live in the Information Age, but I think we're well past that.

Google has made a good business from helping surfers discern between relevant and non-relevant data, but it still fails to give me the information I'm looking for 85% of the time.

Facebook has kept a lot of noise out by restricting the people who can communicate with me.

SPAM filters worked for a very short time, but email is coming so hard and fast that a 12-year-old can figure out how to get around most SPAM filters.

Even in businesses, the free flow of information has led some to believe they should email every single detail of their project to everyone with even a remote interest.

Is anyone else finding the Information Overload Age to be robbing us of living time, while intending to help us with learning time?

We've got to stop relying on technology to help us from information overload.

We need to take better control of the information we allow into our lives.

While many business leaders have made it to the top by using effective time management skills, tomorrow's business leaders will have to become effective at information management skills as well if they want to be successful. (most people that do manage their time well now have already realized how time absorbing email and information gathering has become).

To become more effective at information management, here are some tips:

1. Be proactive. Look at your objectives for the day, and then set aside 5 or 10 minutes every morning to decide what outside information you may need for the day. Make a conscious

decision on how often you will monitor the expected path(s) of information flow (eg. via a meeting, email, phone call, mail delivery or appointment). Stick to your schedule for the day.

2. Don't wait around for outside stimulus. There are a few times when we are waiting for high priority information via email, telephone, mail, etc. So our tendency is to constantly monitor the email, telephone, mail, etc. until it arrives. Unfortunately, this tendency leads us to being reactive to every email, telephone, mail disruption or co-worker looking to chat. Be very discerning of time spent monitoring these disrupters (email, telephone, mail). Spend your energy on the items that will help you meet your daily, weekly and monthly objectives, rather than monitoring possible disruptions "in case" some important information comes along.

3. Forget "surfing" for good. Like shoppers at a huge shopping mall, it is very easy for business people to get lost in space while looking for information on the web. Before you look at the internet, quickly jot down the information you're looking for, and how much time you can afford to look for it. If you find yourself "surfing", that is clicking from web site to web site and forgetting your original intention of getting on the web, then check your notes, and/or close your browser.

4. Help others. By being proactive, and refusing to sit around and wait for outside stimulus, you will already be setting a great example for those around you. To be an even better example, you can explain your reasons for not letting information overload keep you from reaching your objectives. For starters, send these tips to anyone in your office who has web access at their desk.

Life is short.

Less is more.

But don't trust me without trying this for yourself.

Monitor your current workload and results. Then apply the above tips for one or two weeks. Monitor your new workload and results with less disruptions.

If you're having trouble controlling your surfing and email checking, then take more drastic actions. For several hours a day, turn off your email, the ringer on the phone and lock your door. Don't allow any disruptions to let you lose focus.

If you're getting more done at work, then you'll have more time to live.

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