

# Being Wired or Being Tired: 10 Ways to Cope with Information Overload

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is information overload? 27 instant messages. 4 text messages. 17 phone calls. 98 work emails. 52 personal emails. 76 email listserv messages. 14 social network messages. 127 social network status updates. 825 RSS feed updates. 30 pages from a book. 5 letters. 11 pieces of junk mail. 1 periodical issue. 3 hours of radio. 1 hour of television. *That*, my friends, is information overload.

It is also my daily average amount of information received, sampled over a two-week period. That's right—that much in every category every day. I suppose that is why I was called upon to write an article about coping with information overload (IO). I am still here, I am still alive, and my brain has yet to explode, so somehow I must be finding a way to make it work. At least, that is what other people tell me.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Information overload is not a new concept, believe it or not. As far back as the sixteenth century people were complaining about the wide range of information they had to consume in order to contribute to society. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an intellectual revolution occurred as books and written information became more widely produced and disseminated, while innovations and new relationships in economics and the sciences emerged. It is thought that this first revolution of the mind triggered, in kind, the first phase of systemic societal information overload [1]. In 1685 Adrien Baillet lamented, 'We have reason to fear that the multitude of books which grows every day in a prodigious fashion will make the following centuries fall into a state as barbarous as that of the centuries that followed the fall of the Roman Empire.' [2]

During this time, scholars perceived an overabundance of printed material and responded by moving to new ways of processing this material, instead of regular 'cover to cover' reading. For example, scholars of this time turned to browsing, skimming, purchasing, collecting, annotating, dog-earing, cutting, and pasting. These methods are still useful today, and as Blair points out, these methods of encountering and interacting with text are always important but even more so when readers find themselves inundated and overwhelmed with more content than they can process with the regular method [2].

Ted Tjaden offers up another useful list of the ways people have been dealing with information overload since the invention of the

book, many of which we continue to use, including navigational tools like tables of contents, the 'bookwheel' (an early mechanical book search engine invented in 1588 by Agostino Ramelli), 'commonplace books' (topic-based quotation books), encyclopaedias, taxonomies, and shared marginalia in publicly used books for the benefit of each subsequent group of scholars (which today would result in a head-shake and revocation of one's library card by the attending librarian) [3].

In the latter part of the twentieth century the concept of information overload reared its head again with the digital revolution. With the advent of digital information, more information found its way into more hands. Personal computers (PCs) allowed individuals to generate an incredible amount of data. The connectivity of the Internet allowed those individuals to share that information with each other, with virtually no limitations. Mobile telephones, those magical devices that gradually became meshed with portable computing into the new smart phones, allowed users to connect with each other anywhere, anytime, via voice, texting, or IM. Now, with enhanced smart phones with Web browsing and GPS, the hyperlinked world of personal computing has intermeshed with the world of portable devices. And as a result, the amount of information flowing into our lives has increased exponentially.

## 3. THE EFFECTS OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Most of us know, at least anecdotally, that there is far more information flowing into our lives than we could possibly ever process. The following quote from the Basex publication *Information Overload: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us* summarises the issue nicely:

'We have become far more proficient in generating information than we are in managing it, and we have also built technology that easily allows us to create new information without human intervention.' [4]

Information flowing in from the multitude of devices, organisations, and technologies distracts, pressures, and stresses us. And yet we continue to produce information for ourselves and for others. Every time we send out information, information returns to us, usually two-fold. We deal with both interruptive and non-interruptive information every day. When constantly interrupted with that information, we never have those periods of time when you can think, plan and ponder. As a result, our ability to push our lives and our institutions forward has been greatly compromised.

A sustained negative neurological effect of information overload has been identified by psychiatrist E.M. Hallowell. He has called this effect Attention Deficit Trait, or ADT.

'It isn't an illness; it's purely a response to the hyperkinetic environment in which we live....When a manager is desperately trying to deal with more input than he possibly can, the brain and body get locked into a reverberating circuit while the brain's frontal lobes lose their sophistication, as if vinegar were added to wine. The result is black-and-white thinking; perspective and shades of gray disappear. People with ADT have difficulty staying organised, setting priorities, and managing time, and they feel a constant low level of panic and guilt.' [5]

ADT extends to people working in knowledge environments, which in today's service industry-based economy, is a large portion of the workforce. A 2005 Basex survey showed that 28% (2.1 hours) of a knowledge worker's day is consumed by interruptions. In the United States alone, this translates to 28 billion lost working hours and \$588 million in lost profits every year [4]. Other studies have also shown negative consequences as a result of information overload, such as ignoring anything past the first few options, making mistakes, having difficulty relating the details to the overall issue, wasting time, and needing more time to reach decisions [3].

University of London researcher Glenn Wilson showed in a 2005 study that people taking an IQ test while being interrupted by emails and phone calls performed an average of 10 points lower than the baseline group without those interruptions. A frightening footnote to this study is that another test group had been tested after smoking marijuana, and they only performed an average of 4 points lower than the baseline group – from which one might reasonably conclude that persistent interruptions have a two-and-a-half times more detrimental effect on the brain than smoking marijuana [4]. How can workers expect to be efficient in an environment unwittingly set up to see them fail?

#### **4. THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS AND OTHER INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS**

There is a unique relationship between librarians and the concept of information overload. Processing information appropriately is key to the success of our profession and key to the success of each of us as professionals. People look to us to help them process information, to pick what information on which to concentrate, and to discard irrelevant information. Librarians are trained to evaluate information, and to choose the best of the best. One would think, therefore, that we would be more adept in dealing with the problem of information overload. We have the skills necessary for evaluating, organising, and collecting information in ways that allow for efficient processing and retrieval. Those skills are central to the success of many of our colleagues, librarians or not.

John D. Halamka describes how, at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, they have replaced libraries with information commons and renamed the librarians 'information specialists' and the libraries themselves were renamed as the 'Department of Knowledge Services.' [6] The renaming itself was most certainly a superficial symptom of the reorganisation and reprioritisation in the institution's libraries (pardon me, the Department of Knowledge Services). The key was the new emphasis on the importance of information—the focus on the content. As more

and more information floods into businesses and other organisations, we information professionals, or whatever we are called, will be indispensable in helping our co-workers and users to process their data, thereby helping the institution overall.

So, how do we combat information overload, also known as ADT? Hallowell recommends face-to-face interactions every few hours (what he calls a 'a human moment'), exercise, enough sleep, a good diet, keeping one's workspace tidy, breaking large tasks down into smaller ones, and setting aside part of your day as 'appointment and email free.' But what really works? What do the people working in the field do to help themselves?

### **5. TEN TECHNIQUES TO MANAGE THE OVERLOAD**

Below are ten techniques for managing information overload, each in a distinct area of information input. Not everything will apply to you, your life, your job, or the types of information with which you deal. Use those that make the most sense in your own life. Start with one change, and move forward from there. The overall idea is to take control of the information instead of letting it control you.

#### **1. General Organisational Techniques**

Most people have never stopped and thought about all of the information flowing into their lives. Much like a medieval castle, the initial structure was built many years ago, and bits and pieces were built later, added on to the original structure, resulting in a massive entity with a lack of central planning. Florence Fass wrote that "The first step to organising the information flow is to identify its sources and methods of delivery, and then select the source and method best suited to your practice." [7] Let's start there.

#### **Make an Inventory of Information Received**

Make a list of every item you receive, broken into a work category and a personal category. Note two details for each item on the list: the subject or type of data and the method of transmission. Use this inventory to think about what you receive, how it reaches you, and whether or not each one is working as well as it could for you. If it is not, think about other ways you could receive the same information that would work better for you, and make that change.

#### **Make an Inventory of Your Devices**

Not only do we need to consider the data, and the mechanism for their input, but the devices we use to access that data. I have a choice about accessing my work email; I can use any of three different computers or my smart phone. I have a choice about what device I use to talk to my parents; do I use my home phone or my smart phone? Consider all of the devices you use, and add a third detail for each of the items listed in your inventory: what device do you use, and whether or not you should use a different one.

#### **Read Up**

There are many books about information overload and dealing with information generally. Here are some of my recommendations: *Information Anxiety* [8] and *Information Anxiety 2* [9] by Richard Saul Wurman, *Take Back Your Life!: Using Microsoft Outlook to Get Organised and Stay Organised* by Sally McGhee [10], *Techno Stress: The Human Cost of the*

*Computer Revolution* by Craig Brod [11], and *TechnoStress: Coping with Technology @ Work @ Home @ Play* [12].

### **Think Before Sending**

Before using RSS, IM, email or any other tool to deliver information to someone else, think about whether or not it would be better or easier to talk in person or via the phone. Think not only about what would work better for the other person as an input, but what would work better for you when you receive a reply.

### **Schedule Yourself**

Use your calendar not only to schedule yourself for meetings and appointments. Schedule your workday to include time set aside to check your email, to take some time to reflect, check your RSS feeds, and more. Stick to the time you have allotted yourself.

### **Schedule Unscheduled Work**

We all have work we have to do, but which does not have to be done today. How do we organise this effectively? Some productivity software offers task lists, but often those lists are kept separate from the email or calendar system and thereby often get ignored. Instead, fold your to-do list into your calendar by scheduling yourself to work on these projects. Add these to-do items to your calendar at the end of the day, with each item having its own slot. Be sure to schedule these items after work hours so people do not think your workday time is blocked out. If you have huge projects, break them into smaller tasks, with each one having its own slot. That way you can cross one off your list, even though you still have three pieces of that project left to do. If you do not finish an item one day, simply forward it to the next.

### **Use Your 'Down Time' to Your Benefit**

If you have down time while you are commuting, waiting for appointments, or any other time, use that time in a way that works to your benefit. Plan ahead and bring your favorite magazine with you to the doctor's surgery instead of just reading what they have there.

### **Stay Tidy and on Top**

Keep your workspace tidy by filing paper items into to-do folders or archive them appropriately. Keep archived items out of sight in cabinets or on shelves, not in piles on your workspace.

### **Keep a Waiting List**

Cory Doctorow recommends keeping a file dedicated to keeping track of things he is waiting for: calls, packages, payments, etc. This one file serves as his daily reminder of the things on which he possibly needs to follow up [13].

## **2. Filtering Information Received**

Simple logic dictates that if you have a lot of information coming in, you will have to process it in some way. If you can reduce your input in even small ways, your information overload factor will be reduced. Here are some general ways that you can filter or weed your input.

### **Weed, Baby, Weed!**

Think about whether or not you actually need all of the inputs you are currently using. Perhaps you decide that while Twitter updates from your friends are interesting, its return on investment is small when you consider the interruptions on your computer screen while you are working. Maybe you decide to unsubscribe from

some listservs or weed out your Facebook friend list. If you get your news through both RSS feeds from Reuters and a news show on the radio, you will most likely get a lot of overlap. Pick which one gives you the most and reject the other one. Only keep those things that enrich your life, both professionally and personally.

### **Teach Others**

Have a communication etiquette class for your co-workers where people agree not to use email or the phone to socialise, not to send frivolous messages, one-line replies like 'thank you', or huge file attachments that do not add to the information content of the message. Agree upon standards for when certain types of communication are most appropriate.

### **Schedule Unplugged Times**

Set aside certain weekday nights, weekend days, or hours within the workday, where you will eliminate all means of receiving incoming traffic: no phone, no computer, no PDA, nothing. These brief respites from information inwards will give you time to concentrate on important issues and projects.

### **Unplug at Will**

Unplug completely (again, no phone, computer, or PDA) when you need to concentrate on a major project, or when you are feeling particularly anxious or distracted.

## **3. RSS Overload Techniques**

The advent of RSS has had a huge impact on information received from those who have chosen to use it. It has made the delivery and absorption of certain types of information much easier, but by its very nature has increased the number of points of data for many RSS users. In other words, because it is easier to get the data, why not get more of it to fill up that time that you just freed up? There are ways to use RSS smartly, to use the tool to combat information overload instead of increasing it.

### **Use RSS When Applicable**

You can use RSS not only to get feeds from Web sites, blogs, and other sites, but to obtain information of value to you every day: weather alerts, airport delays, traffic updates, new music on iTunes, new computer threats, sports information, and more.

### **Remind Yourself**

There are ways to use RSS to set up personal reminders to notify you at a specified time.

### **Limit the Number of Feeds**

A microcosm of information overload, a person's collection of RSS feeds grows organically and in an unorganised fashion. Set aside half an hour or more to weed through your RSS feeds, deciding which ones are essential to your work or personal life, and which ones you can delete. The latter tend to be the ones that you simply click through, do not read, feel guilty about, and tell yourself that you will read someday. There is no someday. Start deleting.

### **Organise Feeds**

Organise your RSS feeds into subject-based folders. Set aside a primary folder, right at the top of your list, that includes all of your priority RSS feeds - the ones you read first. Look at those first each day, and only at the others when you need information on a particular subject or have the time to read them.

#### **4. Interruptive Technology Overload Techniques**

Some of the most interruptive technologies in our lives are those that get delivered to us instantly, whether we want them to or not, with no acceptance of the input on our part. The information just shows up. Today, the most-used interruptive technologies are instant messaging, text messaging, paging, and most recently the micro-blogging technology of Twitter. Why is the interruptive technology a problem? Interruptions make us less effective. But they can also interfere with our attention spans. A Basex survey showed that over 50% of knowledge workers surveyed write emails or IM messages during conference calls [4]. We are participating in these conversations all the time, regardless of other things competing for our primary attention. Controlling our use of these technologies is one of the keys to dealing with information overload.

##### **Use Interruptive Technology When Appropriate**

IM, pages, and text messages are useful for short and immediate-need conversations, not for lengthy interactions or those with key emotional content. Moreover, do not use interruptive technology when you do not want a potential permanent record of your conversation.

##### **Check When You Want to**

Do not feel pressured to check your messages constantly. Set aside certain times of the day when you will check your messages. Post these times as events on your calendar, with a reminder, if that will help you stick to the schedule.

##### **Do Not Interrupt Yourself**

Do not interrupt one type of information inwards (like a meeting, conference call, or phone call) with one of these interruptive technologies. Give your attention to the task at hand and deal with other interactions later.

##### **Importance of the Status Message**

Keep your status message up to date so others know where you are and what your availability is. Pay attention to the status of others, as well, and if someone says they are busy or in a meeting, choose to wait to interrupt them until later.

##### **Lobby for IM in Your Workplace**

If you are lucky, your institution uses Instant Messaging for staff-to-staff communications. More institutions need to use IM as a communication mechanism – this would cut down on email considerably and speed up response times to urgent issues. While it switches one format of input to another, it redirects quick and urgent messages to a technology that allows us to deal with those types of messages appropriately.

#### **5. Phone Overload Techniques**

Some people think that the telephone is outmoded, that people now communicate via the other digital methods available. But let's test that assumption. Do you see less or more people talking on the phone in public? Do you spend less time on the phone than you did five years ago, or more? Do you talk to more or less people on the phone? Yes, it is true that the use of email, texting, IMing, and other communication methods have skyrocketed. But they have not replaced phone communications, only supplemented them.

##### **Use the Phone When Appropriate**

Use the phone only when a more personal touch is necessary, and when the inflection behind the words is as important as the words themselves. If your issue can wait, instead choose to send a message that the recipient can deal with when he or she wants to.

##### **Turn Your Mobile Phone Off**

If you have ever been in a large meeting when someone's phone has gone off, usually with a grating ring tone, you will appreciate the need sometimes to turn our phones off. Once again, if you already have one mode of informational input (in this case, a meeting) do not set yourself up for distraction by leaving other information mechanisms on, making yourself look available when you really are not. If really necessary, keep the phone on but put it on vibrate so you cannot interrupt others.

##### **Keep Your Number Private**

Guard your mobile phone number really carefully. The more people that have access to that number, the more phone calls you will receive. Only give your number to people who need to (and whom you want to) contact you anytime, anywhere.

##### **Let It Ring**

Contrary to popular belief, just because the phone rings does not mean you have to pick it up. The alert system of the telephone, the loud persistent ringing, is created to get us to answer it immediately. However, the choice is ultimately yours. If you can see who the caller is and do not want to deal with the issue at that moment, simply silence the ringer and check your messages later. If you are concentrating on a project and do not want to deal with a minor issue, then don't. Let it ring.

##### **Work = Work; Home = Home**

Do not check your work phone messages while not at work. If you are on your way home, at home, or on vacation, you are not working. All of your work contact should therefore be cut off. There are very few exceptions to this: the directors and CEOs are always on. For the rest of us, we should take advantage of every moment we have to ourselves.

#### **6. Email Overload Techniques**

This entire article could have been about email overload. In truth, it is the topic that attracts most attention. The reason for this is probably that it is the most prominent method of communication today, and the one that is the most misused. Below are some tips on dealing with this behemoth of information. Some of them, I hope, may help you.

##### **Stop Doing Email**

Think carefully about how much time you spend wanting spending 'doing email' (whatever the heck that is). Do you find yourself answering the quick and easy (but lower priority) messages instead of focusing on the big issues, the priority problem messages? Of course you do – that's how email is set up to work. You get a great sense of satisfaction from deleting messages, so doing 4 quick ones instead of 1 long one carries with it much more of a reward. Stop the generic treatment of email and instead try implementing the methods below.

##### **Schedule Email Scanning Times**

Set aside a time every morning and evening to scan your email – to file away items that need filing, to annotate items that need your immediate attention, and to reply to questions needing immediate answers. Those quick-answer replies are the only

replies that should happen during this time period, though. All others should wait. You can even set up your email provider only to deliver messages to you at specific times during the day by turning off the setting that delivers messages to your account right away.

### **Deal with Email by Subject**

During the day you will address different projects, different priorities. When you do that, go back into your email only to look for messages relevant to that project. Those messages are part of the larger project, and if they are folded in with the rest of the data points about that project (print materials, phone messages), your efficiency in completing your work will be positively affected and the general scourge of ‘doing email’ will be no more.

### **Use Email When Appropriate**

If you send more email, you will receive more email. Think about what you are sending before doing so. Use email when the issue is important enough that it needs to be recorded, when it involves many people needing to see what is written, or when you anticipate very little back-and-forth. A good rule is that if more than four messages are sent on an issue, a phone call or in-person meeting might work better.

### **Keep Your Inbox Empty**

Think of your inbox as a staging area, the first stop on an informational path. Once you have addressed an email, delete it or file it. Do not treat your inbox like a to-do list, keeping messages you need to save or possibly address someday in that one place. If you need to save an attachment from a message, save it to your hard drive and delete the message, unless the message contains additional contextual information, in which case you can file the whole message in the right folder.

### **Filter Your Messages**

Add rules or filters for the mail you receive, redirecting messages into separate folders. Cory Doctorow encourages using colour-coding as a way to distinguish messages from known senders from those coming in from others. He recommends ‘a soothing green.’ [13]

### **File Your Messages**

File messages into the right folders once they have been addressed. Create separate folders for committees, groups, projects, or even folders for messages from particular individuals. Pick whatever organisational system works for you. Darlene Fichter recommends using a naming convention for your folders that allows for sub-groups: such as TechCommittee.Agendas, TechCommittee.ProjectRequests, etc. [14] Darlene Fichter also recommends using a naming convention for your folders so the most-often used folders always appear at the top of the list. To achieve this, she simply adds a zero (0) to the beginning of popular folders [14].

### **Limit Listservs**

Listservs and group email lists are a large portion of unread email in most people’s accounts. Review the listservs you subscribe to and cancel subscriptions to those you rarely read. If you find you cannot remove yourself from lists you want to leave, you can usually add the sender to your spam detector. Cory Doctorow recommends writing a mail rule that will put all listserv messages into a special folder, except for any messages including your

name, which are still funnelled into your inbox. To do this, create a rule as follows: If subject line includes {name of list} and body does not include {your name}, then the message goes into the listserv folder [13].

### **Follow Good Email Etiquette**

There are some general email etiquette rules that, when followed by individuals throughout the organisation, can lead to better intra-institutional communications. Some general tips to follow include addressing only one topic per email, using ‘Reply to All’ only when absolutely necessary, using attachments only when necessary, adding no reply is necessary notes when it applies, and limiting work email to work topics.

### **Delete and Archive**

Your email provider, especially at work, may have a limited amount of disk space for each account. As such, you may be forced to delete messages periodically. Even if this is not the case, you should remember to go through the content in your Sent, Deleted, and Saved folders periodically to discard what is no longer needed. Instead of permanently deleting any message, I recommend archiving your messages off-server instead. Some systems provide for automatic archiving, but if your system does not, you can copy months’ worth of deleted or sent messages into a folder on your hard drive, naming the folders with a convention like Deleted08.01-08.03 or Sent 08.01-08.03 so you can easily access the right content if needed.

## **7. Print Media Overload Techniques**

While digital media is a more immediate form of information overload, most people still have to deal with an influx of printed material as well. If you’re like me, you have a couple of piles at home. A 3-foot pile of books, magazines, and newspapers next to the bed for reading eventually. A stack of mail, catalogues, and bills on the kitchen table waiting for weeding and attention. How do we reduce the piles?

### **Just Because You Can Touch It Does Not Mean You Have to Keep It**

Dealing with physical objects is usually more difficult for people—probably because you have a visual reminder that you have things to do and words to read. It’s harder to discard something when it requires a physical action. Treat physical data the same way you would treat digital data: if you do not absolutely need it, throw it out.

### **Cancel, Cancel, Cancel**

Cancel subscriptions to periodicals you rarely read. If you do not get to read the Sunday paper until the following Saturday, that is a clear sign that you need less information. Cancel subscriptions to catalogues that you do not want on the Web site CatalogChoice.org [15]. Not only is it good for you, it is good for the environment.

### **Weed What You Have**

If you have persistent piles, weed through them twice a year to throw out what, realistically, you will never read or in which you have lost interest. Donate your discarded books and periodicals to the library. Let someone else add them to their information overload.

## **8. Multimedia Overload Techniques**

Do you have a favourite television show that you have to watch every week? A collection of checked-out or borrowed DVDs waiting to be watched? Do you listen to news radio on your morning commute? A stack of CDs or a collection of podcasts waiting for listening? Other video and audio informational material?

We rarely think of audio and video entertainment as information input, but it does take up time, mental power, and brain space. If you find yourself with a lot of material in this area, consider the following techniques for lessening its impact.

#### **Choose Entertainment Carefully**

Keep a list of movies you want to watch, and stick to that list instead of letting random browsing place other, less desirable ones higher up the list than those you made a conscious decision to watch. The same method can be applied to music.

#### **Limit Television Viewing**

We all know that television is the great brain drain. While watching a Law and Order re-run can often help your brain de-tox after a stressful workday, watching four in a row probably has diminishing returns. Limit your viewing to those programmes that you really want to watch, and never, ever watch something you have already seen.

#### **Use Your Commute to Your Benefit**

If you have down time while you are commuting, use that time in a way that works to your benefit. If you have podcasts that you listen to, download them to an MP3 player and plug it in to your car's audio port. Or, if podcasts are not your style, choose to have some silent time instead of listening to meaningless radio chatter. That silence will help recharge your mental batteries so you arrive at your destination ready for anything.

### **9. Social Network Overload Techniques**

For individuals who have dived headlong into social networks and virtual worlds, the very real information overload and time-drain from these mini-worlds has significantly influenced the overall flow of information. In some cases, applications within social networks (such as in-network instant messaging, in-network email messaging) have replaced other information sources. However, in many cases these new streams from the social networks have simply added to the overall flow of information. Here are some tips for dealing with that influx.

#### **Schedule Time on Your Networks**

Allot yourself a set amount of time to deal with your social networks. Logging in at the beginning of the day can be very dangerous – the friend requests, messages, photo and wall comments, new status updates, blog posts, and fun applications can suck hours out of every day if you let them. Stick to whatever time you allotted yourself.

#### **Pick a Primary Network**

Many people have profiles on MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, Ning, and other networks. The logic is to be available everywhere, all the time. To reduce your daily input, pick one network as your primary method of connecting with other people—whichever one gives you the most benefit. Keep your profiles on the other sites, but only check them weekly. If necessary, inform people who contact you via the other networks

that the primary network you have selected is now your preference.

#### **Limit Your IM**

If you have IM set up through another network, turn off that functionality in the social network. People who contact you in that way will quite likely have regular IM accounts as well, so you will lose nothing, but rather consolidate the IM you receive into one place.

### **10. Time and Stress Management**

Two big parts of managing information overload are good time management and stress management. Dr. Larry D. Rosen, research psychologist at CSU, describes the problem succinctly: 'All these forms of communication are now staring at you and saying "Deal with me first." You walk by your computer and it says "Check your mail!" or it dings at you. It's designed to draw you in. You can't stop.' [16] If the incoming information causes you to manage your time badly or causes you stress, then examining your day-to-day activities can be very beneficial.

If you know that you have problems managing your time in general, or that you have problems managing stress on and off the job, then taking some time to address those problems separately will aid you in managing the information influx. There are books aplenty on both topics, but here are some general tips:

#### **Use Your Calendar**

Keep one central calendar to manage both your professional and personal commitments. Keeping an online calendar? Make sure you keep a weekly printed back-up copy in case the server or online access goes down. Using a printed calendar? Think twice. If you lose that one piece of paper, you will lose all of your organisation in one shot. Try using Google Calendar if you do not have a pre-set system at work.

#### **Take Breaks**

Take scheduled and unscheduled breaks throughout the day and do something fun or relaxing to let your mind ease off from the anxiety it is exposed to during the workday. Be sure to do something physical as well, such as stretching your wrists or your lower back.

#### **Eliminate Stressful Interruptions**

If you find yourself jumping at audio signals like IM notifications or phones ringing, then silence them. If you feel a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when you look at your email, then do not look at it as often. Think about those stressors and do what you can to reduce them.

#### **Look for Software Help**

A lot of time management software is out there for good reason. There are programs to remind you to take breaks, to offer audio signals to remind you of appointments, and pretty much anything else you can think of. My favourite is a Zen meditation site that offers software that will remind you to take a meditation break at certain times during the day.

#### **Balance Your Life and Work**

If you find yourself tapping at a keyboard next to your partner on the sofa while you are watching a movie, instead of sidling up next to him or her, you may have a work/life balance problem. Think long and hard about whether or not you have your priorities

in the right place. If you know you do not, then you should seek help to re-balance your time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Dealing with information overload has become a task for each and every one of us, and yet very few of us have actually stopped to think about the best way to do this. We know that we are interrupted. We know that such interruptions affect our work and capacity to think in an adverse manner. And yet, because of the very problem itself — the constant flow of information and tasks demanding our every moment—we do not stop mid-flow to assess and organise. Examining each information input in our lives, including the content, delivery method, and access device, will help us to realistically assess what it is we're doing with our time. Consciously thinking about the effectiveness and desirability of each stream of information, and of ways to improve them, will help to get the best information to you in the best way.

I believe that, as information professionals, we are best equipped to recognise information overload and deal with its effects. We know information; it is our business. We are better positioned than anyone to deal with our own information load and to share those skills and techniques with those we serve. Make the topic of information overload a subject at a staff meeting, the topic of a customer training, and a topic of research for your organisation's training or technology teams. Together we can help people in general to deal with this deluge of information. But first, we have to deal with our own flood. Happy sailing!

## 7. REFERENCES

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