BURIED ALIVE

Every day we are inundated with an ever-increasing amount of information. It is an escalating challenge that we are compelled to wrestle with as individuals and as workers in the twenty-first century. These statistics provide vivid examples of the explosion in both volume and speed of information:

- The daily New York Times now contains more information than the seventeenth century man or woman would have encountered in a lifetime.
- About 2,000 books are published internationally every day; 1,500 books are published in the U.S. every week; and the total of all printed knowledge doubles every five years.
- Experts estimate that information doubles in the world every 72 days.
- Technology advances make information obsolete every 16 months.
- The average corporate worker is sending and receiving over 200 messages each day; workers in the top 20% of message volume average 363 messages each day.
- The average business manager reads almost 1 million words per week...about 28 hours worth.
- Information transfers by e-mail now exceed information transfers by the postal service with over 1 billion instant messages sent daily.
- The average American sees 16,000 ads, logos, and labels in a day.

Psychologists and researchers studying the impact of information overload assert that part of the problem is the limited neurological capacity of humans to process high volumes of information. The human brain has significant long-term memory storage capacity but has a short-term memory capacity of seven bits of information, plus or minus two. For example, most people are able to repeat a series of seven single digit numbers but are unable to repeat a series of nine or ten single digit numbers.

The function of short-term memory is to screen or sift out important or necessary information from the total information received. The volume of information received daily by corporate workers and many professionals is taxing and increasingly overwhelming their human capacity to sort the important from the irrelevant or unimportant.

Studies of the impact of information overload upon corporate managers in the U.S. and abroad provide insight into how this information overload may impact the legal profession. In 1996, Reuters News Service conducted a study of 1,313 junior, middle, and senior business managers in the U.S., England, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Australia. Their report, *Dying for Information? An Investigation into the Effects of Information Overload in the UK and Worldwide* found that:

- 41% of the managers surveyed reported that their working environments were very stressful;
- 67% of respondents reported that their work life and personal life suffered due to the stress induced by information overload;
- More than 50% of the managers were sure that the stressful nature of their work would intensify over the next two years due to the continued inundation of information; and
- Increasing numbers of workers were suffering ill health due to the stress of information overload and predicted that the Internet would play a primary role in aggravating the problem further.

A follow-up study one year later, *Glued to the Screen: An Investigation into the Effects of Information Addiction Worldwide* found:

- 65% of managers surveyed reported that their working environment had grown more stressful, with tighter deadlines and more information
received and used each day.

- When there is too much information, over half of managers ignore it, 61% delegate it to someone else to deal with, and 84% percent store it for future reference – thereby contributing to the buildup of an unmanageable amount of information.

- 47% of managers take material home or work longer hours to keep up with the amount of information accumulated.

- 60% of survey respondents say leisure time has been reduced as a result of working late or taking material home with them in order to deal with vast amounts of information (compared to 49% in 1996).

- 71% of respondents believe reduced job satisfaction and tension with other colleagues result from the stress of dealing with the quantity of information needed to fulfill their tasks (compared to 66% in 1996).

- 43% of survey respondents look over work-related information while on vacation.

One strategy that workers and professionals are employing in their wrestling match with information and task overload is to multi-task. Multi-tasking creates the impression and perception that we are doing two tasks simultaneously. However, multi-tasking actually involves rapidly switching our attention back and forth from one task or stimulus to another.

In their book, Technostress, psychologists Larry Rosen, Ph.D., and Michelle Weil, Ph.D., note: “Like jugglers, people have inherent limits as to how many balls they can keep in the air at the same time. If they try to manage too much at once, their cognitive system, or brain, doesn’t work very well. In fact, with just a few too many thoughts, our entire system goes into serious overload and, just like the overextended juggler, all the balls start falling, and one must scramble to pick up the pieces. …When animals are forced to multi-task, they become nervous, frightened, and eventually frozen into inactivity or launched into a frenzy. Humans subjected to excessive laboratory-induced multi-tasking show increased tension, diminished perceived control, and even experience physical discomfort.”

In a recent ABC News report, Dr. Marya Barey of the Seattle counseling center, Family Services, described our attempts to multi-task our way through the constant bombardment of information and task overload as “being on the spin cycle.” She observes that “people can take in only a finite amount of external stimuli before they begin to lose sleep. …They can’t wind down, and they feel like their lives are spread too thin.” Rosen and Weil agree.

When we are experiencing processing overload, the brain runs full tilt at times when it really needs to be quiet and resting. So, in the middle of the night, we wake with a myriad of ideas and are unable to fall asleep until they are removed from our active consciousness. We are actually searching for ways to turn off our brains and get the rest we need.

A recent report by the Families and Work Institute found that of workers who have remained employed during the economic downturn of the past eighteen months, 54% feel overworked, 55% feel overwhelmed by the workload, 59% lack time for reflection, 56% can’t complete their assigned tasks, and 45% must multi-task too much. Another recent study shows that 23% of American workers have been driven to tears because of workplace stress.

Technology not only directly contributes to information overload, it also indirectly contributes to it through a phenomenon Rosen and Weil label “time compression.”

When we are faced with tasks, we rely on our own internal clocks to estimate how long the task will take. Rosen and Weil assert that the speed of technology has put our internal clocks on “fast forward.” As a result of this fast forwarding or “time compression,” we tend to consistently estimate that tasks will take less time to complete than they do. Consequently, instead of saying no to additional work when we are busy, we take on more, further exacerbating our overload.

**STRATEGIES TO TURN THE TIDE**

Weil, Rosen, and others advance the following suggestions for managing information overload:

- **Set limits and boundaries:** Advise others of your preferred form of communication. Designate the best times for people to call or fax you. Ration the time
you spend watching television, listening to the radio, and cruising the Internet.

**Give yourself solid, uninterrupted time to work on one task.** Make it a priority to complete a task before moving on to the next.

**Respond on your own time:** Disable the e-mail "ding" and turn off the ringer on the fax machine. You can respond when you are ready.

**Sift and trash:** Try to focus on the information you really need instead of news blips that distract. Separate the vital and important from the rest. Don’t save a huge pile of articles, faxes, and e-mails that you intend to reconsider at a later time.

**Use the technologies that work for you:** You don’t have to acquire every new technology. If beepers and cell phones cause you stress, stick with voice mail.

**Relax when technology makes you wait:** Instead of getting irritated while your computer boots or a company’s telephone system puts you on hold, use that time to rest or tend to small tasks.

**Schedule time away from information:** Set aside slots for exercise, sports, dinner with friends, and family vacations.

Hopefully this article has not added to your information overload. If you would like to discuss additional stress management strategies, call the OAAP (503-226-1057) and ask to speak to one of the program attorneys.

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