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Information Overload — is there a Cure?

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- Do you feel overwhelmed by all you have to do?
- Developing a tendency to procrastinate?
- Feel forgetful and find it harder to recall details?
- Becoming more irritated than usual?
- Have difficulty finding information when you urgently need it?
- Resent the amount of voice mail, e-mail, and other material you receive everyday?

If you answered yes to some of the above questions, rest assured you are not alone.

You may be suffering from Information Overload, Information Indigestion or Data Smog. I confess, I am a fellow sufferer of this common ailment but I am on my way to recovery.

A Reuters News Service study of 1300 managers found the following:

- ◆ 38% waste a substantial amount of time looking for information
- ◆ 42% attribute ill health to stress caused by information overload
- ◆ 43% could not make important decisions because of information overload
- ◆ 61% suffered damages to social relationships as a result of information overload.

Many of us are the victims of Information Overload. Some of us have been force fed information by the demands of our expanding roles. Others have developed a craving for the collection of meaningful or meaningless data. In all cases, the abundance and easy access to information have created a society of information gluttons and addicts. Many of us are suffering without knowing it. We blame our symptoms on responsibilities, work demands or a stage of life. We must stop and look for a solution.

The negative effects of information overload are attracting the attention of many researchers. In his excellent book, "Data Smog: Surviving the information Glut", David Shenk refers to several studies that confirm the negative impact of information overload. Here are four of the references he listed:

- ◆ **Impaired Judgment.** "...as information load increases, integrated decision making first increases, reaches an optimum... and then decreases..." (Streufer et al., Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1967)

- ◆ **Overconfidence.** "... as people were given more information, confidence in their judgments increased, but accuracy did not..." (Stewart et al., Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 1992)

- ◆ **Decreased benevolence.** "...a person's response to someone needing assistance decreases in likelihood as his environment increases in its input bombardment..." (Korte et al., Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1975)

- ◆ **Increased cardiovascular stress.** "...Blood pressure rises, leading to strain on the heart and other organs". (Ettema et al., Ergonomics, 1971; Boyce, Ergonomics, 1974)

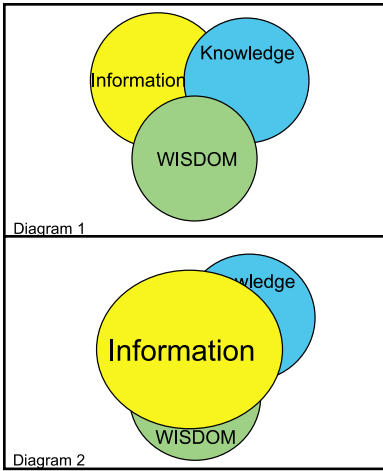
Please don't misunderstand me; I am not against the information age. I am a 30-year veteran of this industry and hold all respect for our achievements. Our goal for years has been to collect and communicate information. Now a revitalized IT industry is emerging as "Collaborative Knowledge Management". With data warehouses, electronic records, search engines, and browsers as some of the common tools, we still encourage the collection and delivery of massive amounts of information to weary minds.

But, how about you? Your head is exploding with data, your mind is confused with information, your eyes are glued to the web, and your friends stopped calling you. Does anyone care? Is there a personal knowledge management tool?

Diagnosis:

While this problem may seem new, it is as old as the Bible. King Solomon (1000 BC) said "Be warned: there is no end of opinions ready to be expressed. Studying them can go on forever and become very exhausting!" Ecclesiastics 12:12 (LB).

Have we been fooled? We used to say that information is power. Now we understand that information of itself is worthless. Knowledge, not information, is a source of power. Unless we process



information and turn it into knowledge it remains of no value. **Effective living lies in our ability to relate knowledge to life's circumstances in a proper and timely manner. We call this wisdom.** Diagram 1 illustrates the balanced interaction between information, knowledge and wisdom. Diagram 2 illustrates how information overload can crowd our life leaving little time for knowledgeable processing. Under the pressures of time we misapply knowl-

edge, and wisdom goes by the wayside.

What is the answer? I do not believe that new technologies hold the answer to our personal information overload problem. May I recommend a **Personal Knowledge Management Framework (PKMF)** - a self disciplined approach to help individuals manage the problems of information overload. PKMF easy to implement processes and disciplines can result in significant benefits. Diagram 3 illustrates this framework.

Key Questions for the Personal Knowledge Management Framework

How do I define my information needs?

Employ a priority based information filtering and processing system founded on:

- ◆ Personal values and goals
- ◆ Important people
- ◆ Important subjects
- ◆ Supporting processes, and tools

What is an effective processing system?

Handle it once:

- A. Process it:
- Act on it NOW if you can
 - Plan it for future action and
 - File it where you can easily find it
- B. Delegate it or send it out
- C. Delete it

What are key qualities of a good filing system?

- Simplicity and low overhead
- Fit to your roles and work style
- Flexibility adjusting to changing needs
- Adaptability for paper, electronic and other media

What are the key components of a good system?

A tailored, well maintained system will include:

- IN BOX: Receives all information input and feeds your filtering system
- HOT FILE: Working files supported by well planned activities
- WARM FILE: Reference operational and project related files
- COLD FILES: Historical archives
- BRIEFCASE: To support your out office needs
- OUT BOX: Ready to release Items and delegated activities
- DELETE BOX: Timed, stamped, deleted items and documents

In his widely used book, *“Personal Efficiency Program”*, Kerry Gleeson refers to a report by *The Wall Street Journal* that states, “The white-collar worker spends an average of 6 weeks a year looking for information in the office.” This is more than 10% lost of a working day. In his recent book, *“Values Shift”*, the industrial psychologist, Dr. John Izzo, indicates that most of us look for more balance in our life. We want to spend less time at work and more time with important relationships. How many of us would like to direct some of that 10% wasted time to moments spent with family and friends? Improving your knowledge management efficiency may be just what you need to cure your information addiction. It helped me.

