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**ZONDERVAN™**

*Surviving Information Overload*  
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## chapter 1

# WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

Today's unprecedented problem:  
too much information

Read this chapter if:

- You don't understand why you feel so overloaded; you didn't always feel that way.
- You keep expecting things to get less stressful, but that day doesn't seem to be coming.
- You want to read this book but don't feel you can spare the time.

You're normal. You're not crazy. But too much information may be making you feel stressed, distracted, or overwhelmed. Do you recognize any of the following signs of information overload?

1. You feel life has become just too complicated.
2. You know your cell phone, PDA, or laptop can do a whole lot more than you're using it for, but you don't have time to read the manual or help programs.



3. You miss a meeting and are upset that nobody told you about it. Then you find out you were sent an email that moved up the meeting date, but that email is still in your inbox, unread.
4. You attended a great seminar and took notes, but as soon as you got back, the crazy pace picked up again, and you haven't done anything with the notes yet.
5. Someone mentions a book you haven't read or a movie you haven't seen. You nod as if you have.
6. You find it nearly impossible to concentrate on a project because of phone calls, email, voice mail, and interruptions.
7. You go to vote, and you don't really know anything about most of the candidates on the ballot.
8. Your mind keeps churning after you go to bed and keeps you awake.
9. There was a time when you wanted the PC, digital camera, or DVD with the most features; now you just want the simplest.
10. You recently had an important file or check in your office, but for the life of you, you can't find it.
11. A country has been in the news a lot lately, but you're not exactly sure where that country is.
12. You have a stack of journals, magazines, and books that never seems to shrink.
13. You're starting to wonder if your memory is slipping, and you're writing things down more than ever because you can't keep it all in your head.
14. It seems like another person in the meeting understands what's going on, but you're not 100 percent sure you do.

15. You worry that your marketability is declining because your industry knowledge is getting out of date.<sup>1</sup>

If you recognized yourself in four or more of these statements, you're awash in information.

Maybe you feel like my friend Jim, who is the head of an association: "It's common for me to be working away on my computer, and I hear the little 'bing' that tells me another e-mail has arrived. While I'm looking at that new e-mail, which will take about a half hour to dispose of properly, another little 'bing' comes, and another, and another, until it sounds like my computer is a monotone xylophone. Then the phone rings, and the day's mail is stacked so high I can't even see my to-read pile of books on the corner of my desk. Stuff just keeps coming in faster than I can handle it, and I feel like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, when he's tightening screws on a production line and stops to scratch his head, getting hopelessly behind."<sup>2</sup>

We need information just to be able to shop, vote, earn money, and use our phone, but the information keeps coming—more and more, faster and faster—until we become frustrated, confused, and unsure of ourselves. Richard Saul Wurman writes that today we feel "a pervasive fear that we are about to be overwhelmed by the very material we need to master in order to function in this world."<sup>3</sup>

Why do we feel overloaded by information? What is going on?

Let me explain five forces unique to our time.

☛ *The world is now producing nearly two exabytes of new and unique information per year.*<sup>4</sup> Don't feel bad if you don't know what an exabyte is. No one does. It's a new term, one they had to coin for a billion gigabytes. The bottom line: more



new information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the last 5,000.<sup>5</sup> Or to say it even more simply, “A weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in seventeenth-century England.”<sup>6</sup>

✚ *New communications technology exposes us to more ideas than ever before.* In *Playing the Future*, Douglas Rushkoff explains, “Inventions like the telephone, radio, television, photocopier, fax machine, modem, cable TV, video teleconferencing, computer bulletin board, and the World Wide Web all function to increase the number of people whose thoughts we encounter. Each successive development in communications technology—whether it’s a cellular phone or an e-mail account—brings a corresponding leap in the number of ideas we’re forced to process.”<sup>7</sup>

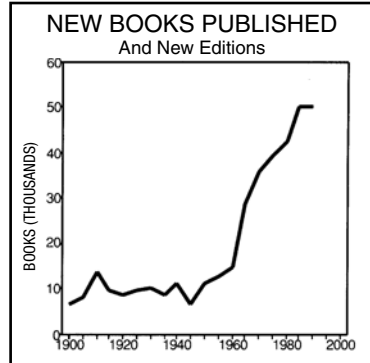
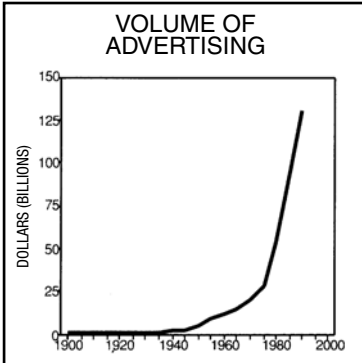
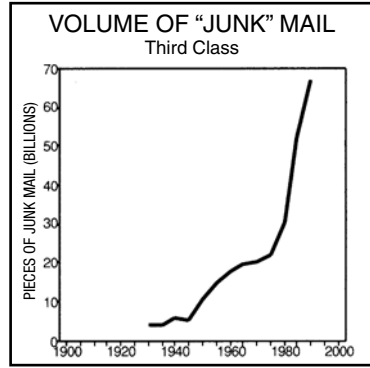
✚ *Work has moved from the floor of the factory to the inside of our heads.* “Ideas are the new steel,” writes Melinda Davis in *The New Culture of Desire*. “This transition from a manufacturing-driven economy to an idea-driven one has . . . relocated great numbers of workers to a new Cerebral-Industrial Complex inside our own heads. At the beginning of the twentieth century, two-thirds of working Americans earned their living by making things, Henry Ford style. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two-thirds earn a living by making decisions.”<sup>8</sup>

This shift means, as David Brooks explains in *Newsweek*, that “today’s business people live in an overcommunicated world. There are too many Web sites, too many reports, too many bits of information bidding for their attention. The successful ones are forced to become deft machete wielders in

this jungle of communication. They ruthlessly cut away at all the extraneous data that are encroaching upon them. They speed through their tasks so they can cover as much ground as possible, answering dozens of e-mails at a sitting and scrolling past dozens more. After all, the main scarcity in their life is not money; it's time. They guard every precious second, the way a desert wanderer guards his water."<sup>9</sup>

☛ *Most information we get is badly presented or incomprehensible.* Even the basics of our lives have become complex and forbidding. Humorist Dave Barry writes, "If you're wondering what a Keogh Plan is, the technical answer is: Beats me. All I know is, I have one, and the people who administer it are always sending me Important Tax Information. Here's the first sentence of their most recent letter, which I swear I am not making up: 'Dear David: The IRS has extended the deadline for the restatement of your plan to comply with GUST and various other amendments until, in most instances, September 30, 2003.' I understand everything in that sentence up to 'David.' After that I am lost."<sup>10</sup>

☛ *Information used to be held in check because it could reach us through only a few channels at a few set times. No longer.* It's hard to remember now, but news came via a newspaper, which was published only in the morning or the evening. TV news flickered on at 5:00 or 10:00 P.M. But the rest of the day, news hid; you couldn't find it. Now CNN, websites, news-tracker emails, and updates on your cell phone wiggle their way into your mind all day, every day. Then the entire zoo escapes: 260,000 billboards, 11,520 newspapers, 11,556 periodicals, 27,000 video outlets, 40,000 new book titles, and 60,000,000,000 pieces of junk mail every year.<sup>11</sup>



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## MORE DOESN'T WORK ANYMORE

You could engrave this on a plaque: MORE DOESN'T WORK ANYMORE.

In his fine book *Information Anxiety*, Richard Saul Wurman reminds us, "Since the advent of the industrial age, we have had a terrific word: 'More.' It really worked for everything. When our roads became crowded, we built more roads. When our cities became unsafe, we hired more police officers, ordered

more police cars, and built more prisons.” But when it comes to information, Wurman declares, “More doesn’t work anymore.”<sup>12</sup>

When the instruction book that comes with my cell phone runs 148 pages, more doesn’t work anymore. When TV serves up 67 channels on cable and 128 on satellite, more doesn’t work anymore. When a doctor has to read 250 articles every day to stay current, more doesn’t work anymore.<sup>13</sup> When a daily paper contains 150,000 words, more doesn’t work anymore.

Our weary little minds are huffing and puffing, trying to keep up, and they can’t. Unlike computers, our brains don’t operate on Moore’s Law: our processing power doesn’t double every eighteen months. G. K. Chesterton, the great British journalist, wrote, “Civilization has run on ahead of the soul of man, and is producing faster than he can think and give thanks.” What scares me is that he wrote that in 1902—before voice mail, email, and the web. If civilization used to run on ahead, it now takes a jet.

More information than we can handle makes us feel disturbing feelings. See if you relate to any of the following symptoms.

☛ *Overloaded.* Vicki, the vice president of Internet operations for a publishing company, told me about when she began managing the department: “I was supposed to be leading an area about which I knew very little. I felt overloaded and overwhelmed by the amount of information out there—and by my inability to locate, evaluate, and integrate it quickly enough. I needed to know everything yesterday.”

Or maybe you relate to Alan, a normally upbeat pastor and writer, who sighed when he told me, “Even books for dummies run 200 or 300 pages long! Give me 20 or 30.”



A recent college graduate complains, “I read the *New York Times*, which contains a book review, which gives me another book to read. The more I read, the more I find there is to understand.”

No wonder the fastest-growing magazine in America is *Real Simple*. Its circulation hit 1.2 million recently. Managing editor Carrie Tuhy explains why: “People have so many choices. The world has gotten so much more complicated. People need someone to be their personal navigator.”<sup>14</sup>

☞ *Distracted*. Can’t concentrate in your office? Maybe it’s because “the average office worker receives some 220 messages a day in multiple media.”<sup>15</sup> In *The New Culture of Desire*, Melinda Davis explains: “The world attacks us with a constant assault of stimulation and distraction, assigns us more tasks than a regiment of wizards could ever finish, and forces us to multitask—to ‘semi-attend’ to everything. *Wired* magazine calls ADD the ‘official brain syndrome of the Information Age.’”<sup>16</sup>

☞ *Guilty*. Many people feel guilt over not being better informed. Said one executive, “I carry a great deal of guilt at times over what I am not reading and don’t know. Because information is so readily available, there is a nagging sense of failure that I am not intelligent enough to absorb and apply more of it. I’ve set up systems, but they have not assuaged the guilt, the nagging sense that I could find a few more hours and use them well.”

☞ *Frustrated*. While we get plenty of information—too much—is it any good? When ethnic wars broke out in Bosnia, news anchors told me how many people got killed in each day’s shelling. They showed thirty-second clips of damaged homes.

But the underlying meaning remained murky. Who were these Bosnians, Serbians, Croatians? Which were Muslims and which were Catholics? Why were they really fighting? Where is Montenegro, and how does it connect? I was getting plenty of information, but I couldn't make sense of it all.

Richard Saul Wurman writes, "The opportunity is that there is so much information; the catastrophe is that 99 percent of it isn't meaningful or understandable."<sup>17</sup> Maybe you've tried to read the manual on how to operate your digital camera, and you can't quite figure it out. You don't know exactly what a megapixel is or why you would want more of them. The manual is thick, but it doesn't really explain your questions. That leads to a common, frustrating feeling: *The more I read, the less I understand.*

☛ *Half sick.* Professor John Killinger recalls "a Vanderbilt graduate student who came to me for counseling because she was having peculiar experiences. She would go into the library and become so overwhelmed by all of the books and all she needed to learn to get her master's degree in history that she had the impression the books on the shelves were all chattering at the same time. She had to get out of the library, out to where it was calm and peaceful again."<sup>18</sup>

Believe it or not, too much information, coming too fast, can make us sick. Melinda Davis, founder and CEO of the Next Group, points out, "We have to deal with an amazing internal commotion: competing, disembodied voices, all battling for top-of-the-mind attention; a constant blitz of stimulation; the grinding gears of brain exertion; relentless, after-hours brain spinning. . . . More than half of American adults . . . say that their brains continue to churn at night when they should be sleeping. . . . The Centers for Disease



Control and Prevention state unequivocally that 80 percent of our medical expenditures are now stress related.”<sup>19</sup>

Still not convinced that information can make you sick? A survey of 1,313 managers on four continents found that “one-third of managers suffer from ill health, as a direct consequence of stress associated with information overload. This figure increases to 43 percent among senior managers.”<sup>20</sup>

In *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight*, developmental psychologist Sharon Heller argues that in today’s hyper-stimulated world, perhaps up to 15 percent of adults suffer from some form of “sensory defensiveness.”<sup>21</sup> Writes Jeffrey Kluger, who reviewed Heller’s book for *Time*: “Maybe you stick a Post-It note over your blinking e-mail icon because the flashing distracts you. Maybe you run an air conditioner in November to drown out the sound of a car alarm that doesn’t seem to bother anyone else.” The coping soon becomes its own problem; your daily decisions are driven by trying to protect yourself from too much stimulation.<sup>22</sup>

## **I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU**

The promise of this book is that despite information overload, you can learn to live and lead with focus, purpose, and results. When the tidal wave of paper and email rolls in, you can learn to surf.

In my approach, you don’t have to be relentlessly organized. You don’t have to buy a bulky system of binders or a bloated software program or a color-coded anything. Most people don’t need neatness; they need a new strategy.

I want to give you the essential skills that will allow you to recognize the information you need and to get results from that information. The simple but powerful strategies I present in this book have been proven. They’ve been tested in publishing

companies and marketing companies, in businesses, associations, and churches, in large organizations and sole proprietorships. These strategies have made a huge difference in my life and in the lives of people who've learned them.

You may have only enough time to read portions of this book. You may be so stressed and overloaded that you can apply only a fraction of what you read. Even so, I predict that as you put to work even small amounts of what's in this book, you'll notice the difference. You'll get behind less and not feel as overwhelmed. You'll make better decisions because you'll have the information you need. You'll find yourself growing, learning, and accomplishing more than you were before.

After reading only parts of three chapters in this book, one man wrote me, "I used to get so discouraged at not finishing some of the books on my shelf. Also [I felt] being overwhelmed at times trying to keep up with the minutes of meetings . . . But now I am learning to just do a list of action notes to be followed up on. The idea of applying at least one thing from what I read, learn or experience has [meant that handling information has] gone from a frustrating exercise to an attainable goal."<sup>23</sup>

You don't have to drown; you can learn to swim.

Let me quickly orient you to this book so you can decide which sections will be most helpful to you. The book has three main parts, plus a bonus part.

**Part 1, "Finding the Information You Need,"** answers the question, "What do I *do* with all this information coming at me?" This section helps you select your key information areas (chapter 2), capture the information you need (chapter 3), and get results from that information (chapter 4). Chapter 4 covers one of the least talked about but most important skills for our time.

**Part 2, "Clearing Information Clutter,"** helps you reduce the flow of incoming email, voice mail, and junk mail. The



strategies presented in these chapters (5–9) will lower your stacks of books, magazines, and newspapers. And they will help you find what you need, both in your office and on the Internet. Pick the chapters that apply to you.

**Part 3, “Creating Space to Think,”** helps you find an oasis amid the overload so you can quiet your soul, think, and create again. Don’t miss chapter 12, “Why We Secretly Like Overload,” because it speaks to our motivations, and when we address our real motivations, we can see lasting, positive change. I’m also fond of chapter 13, “Blessed Are They Who Admit Their Ignorance . . .,” a counterintuitive whack on the side of the head.

**Part 4, “Bonus Stuff,”** is like the extra features on a DVD: check them out or skip them.

I hope you’ll explore this book, that you’ll read at least parts of it and apply some of the ideas to your life, because it will help you move from having too much information to having the right information. It will help you turn intention into action. It will help you live and lead with wisdom.

As you read, you may have questions, suggestions, or additional ideas. If so, I’d like to hear from you. Send me an email at [kmiller@mailcti.com](mailto:kmiller@mailcti.com).

## QUESTIONS TO APPLY



- In my life right now, what symptoms of information overload do I feel?
- On a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), how ready am I to read and apply solutions to the problem of information overload?

## QUOTES TO TAKE WITH YOU

“ We are like a thirsty person who has been condemned to use a thimble to drink from a fire hydrant.

—*Richard Saul Wurman*<sup>24</sup>

“ Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

—*Ecclesiastes 12:12*