



information overload

BY LESLIE SHREVE

What's information overload costing your company? In December 2007, a *New York Times* article stated that for 2008 "information overload" was dubbed a "problem of the year" by Basex, a business research firm, and that \$650 billion dollars is the estimated "cost of unnecessary interruptions" in terms of lost productivity and innovation. That's a staggering loss. Is your company contributing to that number?

If you or your employees are feeling busy but not productive these days, then you're among thousands of professionals today suffering from the aforementioned "information overload" – or perhaps it's also disorganization, time management issues or the absence of systems and processes in place to help you achieve more in your work day, your job, your career or your business.

Here are three things you can do to improve your productivity at work:

KNOW WHERE EVERYTHING IS

Set time aside to thoroughly review all the files and documents (both paper and electronic) and e-mails you're holding on to. The less you have, the less you have to manage and the more you will find only what's useful to you when you need it. Then important things won't get lost in the myriad papers and e-mails you've kept.

Make decisions regarding what's essential to keep or throw away. Throw out or delete those things that:

- You and others have not looked for or needed in months or years
- You can now get on the Internet or on your company Web site
- You can get from someone else if you ever needed it
- Are related to tasks you don't do anymore
- Are expired or outdated
- Are not useful to you

Create file systems for paper and electronic documents using categories and sub-categories so that you can group like items together. The fewer random documents the better.

KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO BE DOING, OR NOT DOING, ALL THE TIME

What do you use to keep track of things to do? If you use pads of paper, post-it notes and your memory, and the files and papers around your desk to remind you of all the things you need to do, then you're missing an important component of productivity. You're missing the ability to prioritize: being able to compare and contrast all the things you need to do, have to do, want to do and dream of doing all in one place.

Get together a single, comprehensive to-do list from which to work. An electronic list is recommended for ease of use and efficiency given how fast we receive information and things to do in today's business world.

KNOW WHERE YOUR TIME IS GOING

Do you run from meeting to meeting like you're on a treadmill? Do you ever get interrupted at work when you're trying to focus? If you can, choose to protect or block some time for yourself each day to get things done. Avoid the back-to-back meetings day after day. You are entitled to some quiet time, and if you're a leader in your company, you can effect change by changing the culture. You and others should be allowed some closed-door time to focus and get a few things checked off the to-do list.

Leslie Shreve is productivity consultant and CEO of Focus Consulting, LLC. www.productiveday.com.

Q&A: WHAT DOES BEING PRODUCTIVE MEAN TO YOU?

Katherine Griffin, CEO, Griffin Enterprises, Inc.

"In start-up mode, it is impossible to avoid stepping into those potholes that distract you from being productive in your core job, which is maintaining the vision. As you delegate, people will become specialized within the task you've assigned. My job is to make sure this leg doesn't get too far ahead of that leg. It's more like I'm the master chef and I have people on the team who know a lot more about presentation or pastries than I do, but I know what the summative experience needs to be for my customers."



Hugh Sisson, managing partner, Clipper City Brewing Company



"For me, the definition of being productive is the more amount of time I have doing the things I think are my highest and best use, and the least amount of time on the other crap. When you start your business, your best use may be selling products, but as it evolves, what becomes the best use evolves with it. You need to take that positive energy and find out what gets you motivated and what is getting in your way, and determine whether you have people with you who

can remove those things so you can focus on doing what you do best."

Frances B. Craig, president, Unanet Technologies



"Being productive means focusing on the right things, then doing them effectively. My assistant plans my calendar for me, but I also plan 'meetings' for Fran so my assistant doesn't book me during those times. So often, you come in in the morning and if there are fires you need to address, then the things you decided to do that day don't get done. So you have to have some time to catch up."