10 Steps To Conquering Information Overload

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Laura Shin
CONTRIBUTOR
I write about personal finance, career, business, the economy and tech

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We’ve all heard the phrase “information overload.”

It reminds us of tweets, texts, emails, the endless stream of interesting
articles on Facebook, those viral videos we can’t help but click on, the numerous phone photos and videos we take, Secret posts, fleeting Snapchat photos and more.

But actually the cognitive flood can be even simpler than that, says Daniel Levitin, McGill University psychology professor and author of “The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload.”

“In 1976, there were 9,000 products in the average grocery store, and now it’s ballooned to 40,000 products. And yet most of us can get almost all our shopping done in just 150 items, so you’re having to ignore tens of thousands of times every time you go shopping,” he says.

By one calculation, he says, we’ve created more information in the last 10 years than in all of human history before that. “I’ve read estimates there were 30 exabytes of information 10 years ago and today, there’s 300 exabytes of information,” he says.

All of this is more information than the brain is configured to handle. The conscious mind can pay attention to three, maybe four, things at once. “If you get much beyond that, you begin to exercise poorer judgment, you lose track of things and you lose your
focus,” he says.

Considering that Americans took in five times as much information every day in 2011 as they did in 1986, we have to make a conscious effort to beat back the flood. Here are Levitin’s top 10 tips for thinking straight, overcoming procrastination and putting in less time but getting more done.

1. **Do a brain dump.**

Get things out of your head. Getting Things Done productivity guru David Allen recommends what he calls “clearing the mind.” This means
creating a big list of everything floating around your head.

Also, immediately write down any thought that interrupts your workflow. “Writing [these thoughts] down gets them out of your head, clearing your brain that is interfering with being able to focus on what you want to focus on,” he says in the book. It also gives permission to your mind to “relax its neural circuits so that we can focus on something else.”

Once on paper, prioritize the items into these buckets: things to do today, things to delegate, things to do this week, and things to drop. Allen calls these categories: do it, delegate it, defer it, drop it.

If you find an item that just keeps lingering on your list, it may be ill-defined — not actionable. For instance, you may write “decide whether or not to get a new car this year.” That would be better broken down into subtasks such as, find out what your car is worth on Kelley Blue Book, ask the car mechanic how much it would cost to keep your current car on the road, etc.

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2. Follow the two-minute rule.

If you have a lot of little tasks, designate 45 minutes or an hour every day to plow through any items that will take you two minutes or less, like emails, phone calls, tidying up, checking your financial accounts, etc.

If you’re not sure how long tasks take you, follow these time-tracking techniques from the most successful people.

3. Clump together similar tasks.

If you have several bills, pay them all at once. If you’re going to clean the house, don’t get distracted by reorganizing your closet. Completing each task once you begin it is another way of being efficient with your mental resources — it forces you to keep attention on one item for a span of time. “This allows us to get more done and finish up with more energy,” writes Levitin.

4. Don’t multitask.

Multitasking “costs” you by forcing you to decide whether to answer or ignore a text, how you should respond, how you should file this email, whether you should stick with what you’re working on or attend to the interruption.

All those little decisions “spend” oxygenated glucose, the very fuel you
need to focus on a task. Switching between tasks will actually make you feel exhausted, disoriented and anxious, writes Levitin. In contrast, “once we engage the central executive mode, staying in that state uses less energy than multitasking and actually reduces the brain’s need for glucose.”

Multitasking trips us up in other ways. Stanford neuroscientist Russ Poldrack found that, for students who study and watch TV simultaneously, information that should go into the part of the brain for facts and storage may end up in the area for learning new procedures and new skills.

If you find it especially hard to disengage, try adopting this one habit.

5. **Limit the distractions of email.**

“Just having the opportunity to multitask is detrimental to cognitive performance,” writes Levitin. Glenn Wilson of Gresham College in London found that having an unread email in your inbox while you’re trying to complete a task can chop 10 points off your effective IQ. Wilson even showed that multitasking is even more of a detriment to memory and our ability to concentrate than smoking pot is.

Since having emails come in every few minutes is so bad for your decision-making skills and impairs judgment,
Levitin recommends tricking your brain into staying on track. For instance, set aside two or three times of day for email. Turn off notifications so you’re not constantly being interrupted. “Many people have their e-mail programs set to put through arriving e-mails automatically or to check every five minutes. Think about that: If you’re checking e-mail every five minutes, you’re checking it 200 times during the workday,” writes Levitin. (If you find it hard to avoid email in the morning when your energy is highest, try these tips.)

6. “Eat the frog” first thing in the morning.

We start each day with our energy for that day. As the day goes on, every decision, whether trivial or momentous, consumes a bit of our glucose. Questions like “Should I use a blue or green pen?” draws from the same energy store as “I’ve just been diagnosed with cancer. Should I opt for radiation or surgery?”

“Important decisions should be made at the beginning of the day, when gumption and glucose is highest,” says Levitin, adding that Oscar-winning producer Jake Eberts used to have a dictum: “Eat the frog.”

“If you eat a frog first thing in the morning, the rest of the day goes better,” says Levitin. “So, whatever is
the most unpleasant thing to do, do it first in the morning.”

Set aside that time with all distractions turned off, and adopt the mindset that that task is the most important thing you could be doing at that time.

7. **Spend only as much time on decisions, tasks and activities as they are worth.**

If you want to organize bills and receipts, there’s no need to go to the stationery store, color code files and spend the next six weekends organizing papers — unless you need to access these files all the time. “If you’re talking about organizing five-year-old bills and receipts, just throw them in a box and when you need something, look for it,” says Levitin.

Find out more about why it’s so crucial to conserve your decision-making energy.

8. **Take breaks.**

“People who take a 15-minute break every couple of hours are much more efficient in the long run,” says Levitin, adding that it gives the brain a chance to hit the reset button in a part of the brain called the insula. “So taking a break, taking a nap, taking a walk around the block, listening to music — these activities, although most bosses would think that they’re a waste of
time, in fact, they’re a big adjunct to productivity and creativity.”

On average, a 15-minute nap can increase your effective IQ by 10 points, he says, though there are individual differences. For most people, however, an hour or two is too long.

9. Let yourself daydream.

The brain operates in two oppositional modes: “one is when you’re directing the thoughts, and the other is when the thoughts take over and run themselves,” says Levitin. Directing mode is the one that allows us to get our work done, whether we’re an office worker, chef or tile layer, but our minds can’t stay in one gear all day long.

In daydreaming mode, says Levitin, “one thought melds into another and they’re not particularly related.” This daydreaming mode acts as a neural reset button and replenishes some of the glucose you use up in staying on a task.

It also has the great benefit of fostering creativity. “The thoughts meander from one to another, creating links between things we might not have seen as linked before, and from that may come the solutions to problems,” says Levitin.
Down time is one of seven types of experiences your brain needs during the day.


“Managers tends to think the workers below them as just doing the work for the paycheck,” says Levitin. “But most workers report they love their jobs, even in jobs where you wouldn’t think that’s possible, like working in city sewer systems, having to shovel manure out of the stable, or people doing heavy labor with jackhammers — things that might sound unpleasant.”

For that reason, most workers like at least some autonomy — and that’s great for managers who may be suffering from information overload, because they can then push down authority and empower people under them to exercise their good judgment.

For instance, General Stanley McChrystal told Levitin about how soldiers used to call him from Iraq in the middle of the night and say, “‘We’ve been watching this building and we think it might have some munitions in it. We’d like your permission to bomb it.’ He’d say, ‘There’s nothing you can tell me on the phone at 2am in five minutes that’s going to make me more expert than you already are. You’ve been watching this building for six weeks. If you think
we should bomb it, you should bomb it.”