

7 Information overload

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1 How many of the following types of information/communication does a typical office worker have to deal with daily? Discuss with a partner.

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a phone calls _____ | e inter-office memos _____ |
| b e-mails _____ | f faxes _____ |
| c voicemails _____ | g mobile phone calls _____ |
| d items of post _____ | |

2 Read the first paragraph of the text and find the answers to 1. Do any of them surprise you? Then read the rest of the text. Which of the points in the text are most relevant to you. Discuss with a partner.

Another day in the office, which, according to one recent study, consists of handling 46 phone calls, 25 e-mails, 16 voicemails, 23 items of post, eight inter-office memos, 16 faxes and nine mobile phone calls.

Enough to send you crazy? You may be right. Gerry McGovern, who is writing a book on information overload, is in no doubt the huge quantity of information has led to increasing stress levels and results in a downturn in productivity.

'I think that, to some degree, long-term or medium-term strategic thinking is being restricted by the necessity to react to the continual bombardment of short-term data,' he says. 'A lot of managers are spending so much of their time coping with the data that's coming through today that they don't have as much time as they should to properly analyse it and put it in perspective.'

Les Posen, a psychologist who has written numerous articles on technology and psychology, says information overload can lead to people losing control of what material is important and what isn't. 'Our filtering systems get overloaded, so the good stuff gets left out as much as the useless stuff, and we might find ourselves not able to easily differentiate between quality material and non-quality material,' he says.

'Someone who spends hours sorting e-mails and getting distracted by unimportant details may be suffering from information overload,' Posen adds. Other signs include switching off completely. He says the key to avoiding information overload is to find a middle ground that recognises the importance of technology to our working and social lives while ensuring it doesn't eat up all our time.

3 Gerry McGovern put forward a list of six skills for dealing with information overload. Rank the skills according to their degree of effectiveness (1 = most effective). Compare your ranking with the rest of your group/class.

Six skills to avoid information overload

- a** Learn to think better. More decisions aren't necessarily better decisions. You might make better decisions if you make fewer decisions.
- b** Learn to plan better. Don't simply react to short-term data. Make sure you are also thinking about the medium and long term.
- c** Learn to research better. Be thorough about what you do. According to a survey conducted last year, only one in 20 people will scroll to the second page of search results.
- d** Learn to organise better. Nurture the architect in you.
- e** Learn to collaborate better. Work towards common goals. McGovern quotes author Frances Cairncross from his book *The Company of the Future*: 'The most widespread revolution in the workplace will come from the rise in collaboration and the decline of hierarchy.'
- f** Learn to network better. People are the network.