

5 SECRETS TO OVERCOMING INFORMATION

OVERLOAD



Information overload has become more prominent in the past several decades since the invention of the Internet. Between the texts, tweets, emails, and the endless stream of news feeds on Facebook, the viral videos we can't help but watch, the numerous photos and videos we take and the multiple phone numbers we collect, we've become overwhelmed and overloaded with, mostly, unnecessary and irrelevant information. With 24/7 information that is available to us with a simple click of a mouse, we are creating and digesting ten times more information than we did just ten years ago. With all this information we can quickly succumb to information overload and the fall to the adverse effects it has on our health and mental well-being.

Unfortunately, our minds aren't designed to handle this much information, and can quickly become overwhelmed as it tries to process all the information we're exposed to on a daily basis. Information overload can not only hamper our productivity, but it can leave us feeling stressed, depressed, and fatigued. Our conscious minds are designed to pay attention to no more than four things simultaneously, according to Daniel J. Levitin, author of *The Organized Mind*. If we go much more beyond this, we begin to exercise poorer judgment, lose our focus, and lose track of important things.

To reduce the effects of information overload on our mental well-being and health, we have to make a conscious effort to reduce the flood of information we consume and clear our minds of all the unnecessary information we accumulate on a daily basis. Here are five secrets to learning how to think straight again, overcome procrastination, and spend less time getting more done so we can move forward and better manage the information we're exposed to in the future.

Secret #1 – Get Things Out of Your Head

The more information we try to cram into our minds, the less our brains are able to accurately process the information, ultimately leading to damaging our your short-term memories. This is because our minds were designed with a limited amount of space and ability to handle information. In fact, over the last ten years, we have created more information than in all of human history before that. The best way to deal with this issue is to completely clear your mind of all the clutter and noise by performing a brain dump.

Doing a brain dump means creating an extensive list of everything that you have floating around in your head, whether it's essential or not. Take the time to write down any thought that interrupts your workflow immediately. The simple process of writing these thoughts down helps to get them out of your head. Performing a brain dump allows you to quickly clear your mind of the irrelevant information that is interfering with your ability to focus on the task in front of you. Clearing your mind in this way also gives your brain permission to relax its neural circuits so that you can focus your attention on something else.

Once you've gotten your thoughts down on paper, you need to spend some time prioritizing each of the items into separate groups. You should have a category for things that you have to get done today, things that you can delegate, things that you can do this week, and things that you can drop. Productivity guru, David Allen calls these categories: do it, delegate it, defer it, and drop it.

If there is an item on your list that you simply can't get crossed off, it may be because it's ill-defined and not actionable. Take a closer look at these items and further break it down into subcategories and create actionable steps that you can take to complete each item.

Secret #2 – Stop Multitasking

For too long, people have considered multitasking as a great way to increase productivity. However, recent studies have shown the opposite effect happens when you multitask. Unfortunately, these studies have discovered that when you engage in multitasking, your productivity in fact decreases. Multitasking costs you by forcing you to decide between whether or not to answer a text, how you should respond, how you should file an email, whether you should stick with what you're currently working on or move onto the interruption.

All of the little decision that you have to make when you multitask, use the finite amount of oxygenated glucose that your brain contains. The oxygenated glucose is the fuel that your mind needs to focus on a task. Continually switching between tasks, quickly uses up your limited amount of oxygenated glucose, which will lead you feeling exhausted, anxious, and disoriented. When we focus on one task at a time, we use less of this glucose and spend less energy than if we would have engaged in multitasking. Focusing on a single task at a time also reduces our brain's need for the oxygenated glucose to function.

Multitasking trips us up in other ways as well. Contrary to popular belief, multitasking doesn't actually save you time. When you jump back and forth between tasks, it will take you longer to complete the tasks than if you would have focused on each task separately. Multitasking also results in more mistakes being made, which can result in a 40 percent loss in productivity.

The best way to beat information overload is to stop multitasking and make a conscious effort to focus on one task at a time.

Secret #3 – Limit Email Distractions

Studies have shown that just having the opportunity to engage in multitasking is detrimental to your performance. Dr. Glenn Wilson, a Psychology professor at Gresham College of London, discovered that merely having an unread email message sitting in your inbox while you're trying to complete a task can decrease your effective IQ by 10 points. Having emails come into your inbox every few minutes is terrible for your decision-making skills and impairs your judgment.

There are several simple things that you can do to limit email distractions and trick your brain into staying on track. The first step that you need to take to limit the distractions of email is to organize your inbox. Many of the popular email applications today allow you to create separate files and rules to organize your incoming messages quickly. Utilizing this helpful tool can keep emails from piling up in your inbox. By applying rules to your inbox, you can move the most important messages into a separate folder automatically, making it easier for you to locate them later on.

Next, you want to turn off your notifications so that you aren't always being interrupted by the chime of incoming messages. Many people have their email programs configured to bring in arriving emails automatically or to check every five minutes for new messages. If you're checking your emails every five minutes during your workday, you're checking it 200 times. That's 200 interruptions that impair your decision-making skills and judgment. Finally, to limit the distractions of email during your day, schedule two or three times during the day to check and respond to email.

Secret #4 – Eat the Frog First Thing in the Morning

In 2001, author and motivational speaker, Brian Tracy introduced the world to the concept of eating the frog. When it comes to your productivity, the frog is the one thing that is on your to-do-list that you have no motivation to complete. Unfortunately, when you have items like this on your to-do-list, you tend to procrastinate on finishing them.

Every day we start with a finite amount of energy that has to last us the entire day. This small amount of this energy is used every time we have to make a decision, and it doesn't matter if the decision is momentous or trivial. Each time we have to make a decision, like whether to use a blue or black pen, or whether you should opt for surgery or radiation, it consumes a bit of the glucose that is used for energy. When we've exhausted our stores of glucose, or energy levels become depleted.

When you have important decisions to make, you should make them at the beginning of the day, when your glucose levels are at their highest levels. If you tackle the most significant and most important task on your to-do-list first thing in the morning, the rest of your day will go better.

Taking action is the key to beating information overload. So, whatever is the most unpleasant tasks on your list, do it first thing in the morning, without overthinking it. Discipline yourself to work on this task until you've completed it successfully. The satisfaction of having achieved something will trigger your brain's production of Endorphins and Dopamine, two naturally occurring chemicals responsible for pleasure and happiness, allowing us to stay focused, motivated, and productive throughout the day.

Every morning, you want to set time aside without distractions to adopt the correct mindset that the task at hand is the most important thing you can be doing at the time. To help remove the stress of choosing the appropriate task, write down your to-do-list in the evening, prioritize the tasks and pick your frog. This way, all you have to do the next morning is take action.

Secret #5 – Utilize the Five-Minute Rule

Many people have issues with their productivity merely because they are overwhelmed with all the tasks that they need to complete. They tend to go through their list of tasks for their day and skip over the ones they feel are too tough. While it may not seem like a big problem, the reality is that when the number of instances increases on a daily basis, they can become incredibly destructive to your productivity.

If you feel that you have so much on our mind that you don't know where to start, you're not alone. This has to do with your lack of clarity in the way you process things and utilize your working memory. When your mind becomes overburdened, or you are trying to process complex information, there is no way your brain can quickly process the information so that you can move forward from one task to the next. This is where the five-minute rule can come in handy.

The system is straightforward to implement in your day, and if used correctly will result in you getting a ton of work done in a small amount of time. To use the system, every morning

list the number of tasks you have for the day. For each task on your list, assign a block of time in five-minute increments. This is followed by other times in increments of 5 or 26. Your list should look something like this.

Phone Calls . . . 5, 10, 26
Email . . . 5, 26, 26
Presentation . . . 5, 26, 52
Break . . . 5
Filing . . . 5, 10

When you've finished writing your list and assigning blocks of time, start at the top of your list, and start working on each task for five minutes. After the first five minutes, move to the next tasks and work on it for five minutes, efficiently moving down your list. When you've finished the last item on your list, start back at the top, working with the next time increment, and so on.

The first five minutes is the key to finding the momentum that is critical to tackling the 26-minute period where you accomplish a majority of your tasks. Implementing this method in your work day will help to make the time go by faster and allow you to increase your productivity.

Conclusion

Dealing with information overload is an inevitable part of our lives in today's hectic, information-driven world. Our ability to access information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has led to us consuming more information than our brains can process. By implementing these five secrets into your days, you can begin to beat information overload and start living a healthier and more productive life.