Tips for Managing Information Overload

Technology has greatly increased the amount of information we receive and the speed at which it arrives. In 2015, business professionals sent and received an average of 122 emails per day[1] and, in 2012, the average worker spent 28% of their day managing email and another 19% searching for information[2].

It is easy to get overwhelmed when the volume of potentially useful and relevant information exceeds your processing capacity, causing all of this information to become a hindrance rather than a help. Information overload can impact your wellbeing and productivity, distract you from contemplative activities, and/or impair your decision-making abilities.[3]

Symptoms of Information Overload

The following are signs that you may be experiencing information overload:

- Chronically talking about not keeping up with what's going on around you.
- Sitting at your desk and not knowing where to begin.
- Assuming you must read every email you receive, regardless of who sent it.
- Forgetting to respond to important emails or missing deadlines.
- Feeling like you do not have the right information you need when you need it.

Strategies for Decreasing Information Overload

The key to managing all of the "stuff" that comes your way is having an organized and coherent system. This will help you keep track of important information and actions you need to do, and prevent unimportant or valueless stuff from taking up your valuable time.

The next page offers some strategies for you to try. They will not work for everyone, so experiment to find something that will work for you.

Additional Resources

- Tips for Managing Email
- Checklist for Email Clean-up
- Email: Your Recordkeeping Responsibilities
- University and Transitory Records Decision Diagram
- Quick Reference Guide to Transitory Records
- Naming Conventions

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[1] The Radicati Group. (2015). Email statistics report, 2015-2019. Retrieved from www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Email-Statistics-Report-2015-2019-Executive-Summary.pdf.

[2] McKinsey Global Institute. (2012). The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies. Retrieved from www.mckinsey.com/industries/high-tech/our-insights/the-social-economy.

[3] Misra, S. & Stokols, D. (2012). Psychological and health outcomes of perceived information overload. *Environment and Behavior* 44(6), 737-759.

The RAFT System: Refer, Act, File, Toss[4]

RAFTing is a system designed to help you stay afloat by ending the inefficient practice of handling the same thing many times. With this system, your goal is to handle each item once by making a decision on each item immediately. Your choices are: refer, act, file, or toss.
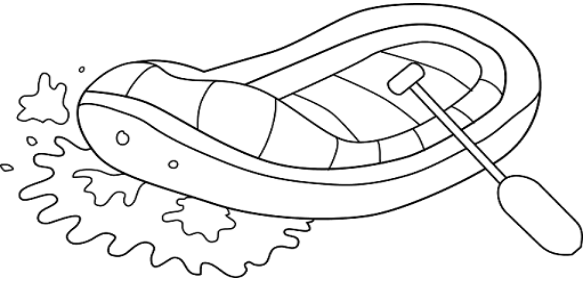
Refer
There is no need for you to act on each item that crosses your desk. Whenever possible, refer to someone else for action, making sure you provide enough information so the person handling the action knows what is needed.

Act
Some material requires immediate action. When you sift through incoming information, identify items that you can take action on right away, where it will NOT require large investments of time. Where the action will be time consuming (e.g. writing a report), set the item aside so you can devote proper attention to it.

Short items can be read immediately. Items that will require more than five to ten minutes to read should be set aside. You may find it helpful to keep two groups of reading material: items that MUST be read, and items that would be NICE to read. Anything not falling into one of these categories should be tossed. Like other actions, it is often useful to schedule time for reading.

Regardless of whether or not you schedule time for action, be sure to record the action you need to take on your to-do list.

File
Material that requires no action but needs to be retained should be placed in a "to file" folder. Schedule time to regularly take care of your filing. You may find it helpful to note the name of the file that the item is destined for, the ULCS classification code, and the relevant disposition date.

Toss
Some material simply has little or no value to you. Toss (or delete) these transitory records immediately, taking care to securely dispose of any material containing confidential information. Examples include: junk mail, many FYI memos, newsletters, and other reports that require no action.

Tickler File System
A tickler file is a way to jog your memory of things you need to do, when you need to do them. It consists of a box or drawer that has a file folder for each day of the current month and a folder for each upcoming month (43 folders in total). Anything you need to be reminded of on some future date goes into your tickler file.

When you are deferring an action item, put it in the folder for the day/month that you need to start working on it. Each day, check the folder for that day and review what items, if any, you find in there. Take care of the contents and move the empty file to the back. At the end of each month, review the file for the next month and place its contents into your day folders.

This can (and should) be used in conjunction with your calendar to help you keep track of the materials for the action items you have scheduled. When you start using your tickler file, you may need to set a calendar reminder to "check tickler file" until it becomes a habit.