



Is Technology Undermining Your Productivity?

Attendees at the Oracle Open World customer event last week heard Michael Dell say that by 2020 the world will generate 35 times as much data annually as in 2010. This data torrent now flowing to a device near you is creating two potential productivity killers we call Dazed by Data, and Confusion by Intrusion. Finding better ways to understand and address them can add to your capabilities, wisdom, and happiness.

(Reading time 180 seconds).

Dazed by Data

Michael Dell's comments just added to the buzz created previously by other high-tech luminaries. Mark Hurd (Former CEO HP, now of Oracle) has stated "more data will be created in the next four years than in the history of the planet." Eric Schmidt of Google says we now create as much information in two days as we did from the dawn of man through 2003. According to Schmidt "The real issue is user-generated content." He doesn't believe people are ready for what's coming. "I spend most of my time assuming the world is not ready for the technology revolution that will be happening to them soon."

How much data can you absorb in the form of emails, instant messages, tweets, Facebook, Google and news updates and still have time to digest what's important...get any work done... or have a life outside of your electronic data interfaces? To what degree might you already be feeling overly busied, stressed, and dazed by data?

Confusion by Intrusion

A consensus of studies shows that about 2.8 hours per day are lost to unimportant and not urgent interruptions and recovery time. That's before we increase the data coming your way by 35 fold.

The unimportant and not urgent intrusions that take you off task during your workday muddle your focus on what is truly important and reduce your productivity. Not only does the unimportant take time to attend to, but each diversion requires refocus time for the more important task at hand. Often the refocusing time, regaining the lost train of thought, takes longer than the interruption itself.

All of us have different capacities, styles, and job requirements. But there is a point of diminishing returns at which the amount of data input into your mind and day produces a negative return. Could you already be there?

The tech industry and entrepreneurs will produce new ways for us to sort and select our data over time, but here are some individual options currently being used by others that can help turn down the volume on the input.

Social Media

Consider setting specific and limited times during the day to check your social media sites and contacts. "I spend way too much time on Facebook" is a refrain I hear from many. "It's really not that rewarding an experience to know what a distant friend just had for lunch, but I get sucked into it." Remember it is not just how much time you take away but the number of times you interrupt your focus from important tasks that makes your day unnecessarily busier.

Emails and Phone

As the accompanying article by Nicole LoVaglio points out, it can be very helpful to others when you quickly respond with short answers to their emails. In some positions, an immediate response to incoming emails is a job requirement as you are the "go to person" for prompt answers.

But for other roles and at other times you could consider silencing your phones and any email notifications while you are focusing on tasks at hand. There is a feature for example in Outlook where you can turn off the notification box that pops up in the bottom right hand corner of the screen every time you get a new email. There are a number of employers that mandate this feature be turned off (it comes automatically on when you start using Outlook) in order to increase productivity and mitigate distractions.

Often we use the flash, or buzz or vibration notice of incoming data as an escape. Being productive on you're "A" priorities is demanding mental work. It can be tedious and takes willpower. Often your incoming data notices provide you an escape to "C" priorities or lower. When they divert your time, you may be doing something, but is it the most important thing you want and need to get done today? Instead of the constant interruptions, you may want to consider focused email response times several times a day (morning – before lunch – after lunch – mid-afternoon). You still can provide timely responses, but in a non-distracting way.

Don't Be Part of the Problem

Current technology provides us with many productivity and connectivity enhancing tools. As the humans controlling those tools, we need to be respectful of how often and for what purpose we use that technology to engage others.

If it is non-urgent or not important, can your questions wait? Can you note the question, accumulate it with other non-urgent items, and send or meet on them all at once later in the day? Do you necessarily have to copy everyone on the email you are sending? Do they need to be part of the conference call at all?

Pausing to be considerate of how best to use technology to connect and not connect with others keeps you from unnecessarily adding to the data overload.

Having a Life in the Rest of Your World

I've recently asked several friends who are married or romantically involved this question: When you are at home together is there a significant difference in the experience of being:

- Together and both of you are on your laptops or
- Together with no laptops and instead watching a TV show?

If so, why?

The response has always been quick. Absolutely there is a difference. Why – because when we are on our laptops we are in separate realms – we are not connected. When we are watching TV, even if we are not talking or looking at each other, we are sharing a common experience. An interesting comment from a very technology tethered couple was “That’s pretty revealing and maybe a little sad that watching more TV would be an upgrade in how we spend our time together.”

Our computers, our smart phones, our TV’s are important and swelling sources of data, entertainment, and some valuable knowledge. We need to make sure we sort and use that knowledge to expand our wisdom, capabilities, smiles, love, and affection in our face-to-face relationships at work and at home.

Smiles,

Jim Bird, Publisher

©2010 WorkLifeBalance.com

Quotes by Henry David Thoreau

“Men have become the tools of their tools.”

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) Thoreau, a classical American writer, taught school, lectured, served as a surveyor for the town of Concord, did odd jobs, worked as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s handyman, and helped him edit the Dial, for which he wrote extensively. In school, Thoreau was so serious his friends called him “Judge”. Later, at Harvard, he amassed 5,000 pages of notes and soon, at age 20, started to keep the diary that eventually comprised 30 volumes.

e-tip

Choose your technology tools wisely. Stay open minded, evaluate, but don’t hesitate to reject the “latest” gadget or social trend if it doesn’t fit you right now. Conversely, don’t isolate yourself from helpful innovation because, “That’s the way I’ve always done it.” It may be working for you, but maybe something else can work even better.

Work-Life Balance Lessons

By Nicole LoVaglio

Work-life balance for me is about giving 100 percent to my job and still having time to stay active, give back to the community, and spend time with people who are important to me. I play volleyball three nights a week, I’m an instructor in the Turner School of Construction Management on Wednesday evenings, I’m a mentor in our Leadership Turner program for new hires, and I do community service work through Turner and my church. I love all of it, but I couldn’t be involved in so many activities if I hadn’t learned how to work smarter, faster, and more effectively.

Here are some of the things I’ve learned to do to help me enjoy good work-life balance and find the energy to remain active in the community:

Take a few minutes every morning to get focused.

I recently subscribed to my church’s daily e-mail devotional and I’m amazed at how it has helped me transition into the work day. The 10 minutes I spend on prayer and reflection each morning help improve my concentration when I’m on the job. Others might try meditation, or some type of thoughtful reflection while stuck in traffic during the commute to the job.

Don’t bring your job home. My boyfriend and I have agreed not to talk about our jobs at home. It’s too easy to get wound up again when we need to unwind, instead.

Protect your health. I’ve found that making some simple dietary changes have helped me improve some health issues and boost my energy. I stick with fruit, light meals, and lots of water.

Be task-oriented. I learned to be task-oriented when I was a high school athlete and had to find time for my homework. I make a list of my tasks and then prioritize them. If I’m spending too much time on one, I set it aside and address the next one so I can keep things moving.

Deal with your e-mail. Most of the messages I receive really only need a one- or two-word answer, so that’s all I provide. Writing more than is necessary takes more time than I’ve got. I also respond quickly because in some situations, people can’t move forward until they hear back from me. The longer I delay responding, the harder it is for someone else to do their job.

Get involved with your community. I think I’m a better person because of community service work I do through opportunities presented by Turner and my church. It helps me assume a more positive outlook, and I truly enjoy giving back. I’m grateful to work for a company that helps us do more of this.

Nicole LoVaglio is a project engineer in the Cincinnati office of the Ohio business unit.