Five quick ways to survive information overload

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It’s become a modern cliché, but we truly are suffering from information overload these days. Never before have we had to process, keep track of and make sense of so much data. Equally, we are faced with more sources of distraction than ever before: constant checking of email, or facebook updates can rob you of the focus needed to think deeply.

However, there are some steps you can take to help ease the stress of this info-glut:

1. Make use of web-based services

Archiving useful information on a web-based service enables you to access it wherever you are: from a PC, laptop, or mobile-phone. Knowing that you have this easy-access means fewer demands on your memory.

One that i particularly like is Evernote.com. Basically Evernote is like an online storage space where you can upload all type of information: photos, text, audio files, clipped web-pages etc. However, it’s so much more than just a storage space. For example, its search facilities are almost miraculous. Say that you write a page of notes on paper, you can take a photo of it with your phone, upload to Evernote and it becomes part of your archive. Should you then ever want to search for any of the words in the photo, Evernote can find them. This level of visual recognition means that you are free from having to type up text, photo or scan anything, upload it, and its immediately available in a searchable archive.

2. Intelligently use paper and electronic devices

When should you use paper and when digital storage? In his book ‘getting organised in the google era’, Douglas Merrill recommends that paper should still be used for working on information (e.g. When you are brainstorming new ideas) but electronic devices like smart-phones or laptops should be used for information that you merely need to archive and reference in the future. This might change in the future when the touch/handwriting interfaces of computers are better, but for the time-being there is still something very immediate and intuitive about using pen/pencil on paper that seems to aid thinking (at least for most of us).

3. Use speed-reading techniques

There are two techniques that can help speed up your reading, enabling you to extract more information-per-minute!

Read non-fiction books and magazine articles with a soft pencil. Use this to underline or make marks on the paper. Using the pencil will help guide your eyes’ movements and making your reading faster and smoother. By marking bits of text that are of interest, you can then easily find them again.

When reading newspaper or magazine articles concentrate on the first and last paragraph. This is where you will find the highest-density of information content.

4. Don’t multi-task

We all only have a finite amount of attention to devote to what we’re doing. You may be able to perform multiple tasks at once, but you are always lowering the amount of attention you can devote to each if you do this. If something requires thinking, try to concentrate all your attention on it. If you must do multiple tasks at once, try to make them require different thought processes. For example, think about a problem whilst walking, or listen to instrumental music when writing (not music with lyrics, as the language centres of

your brain will be divided between comprehending the lyrics and in formulating the sentences you’re writing.

5. Use a system for prioritisation

Just as people can eat too much and become obese, we can graze on too much trivial information and our mental focus can become weakened. Too often our attention is drawn to the apparently urgent but trivial stuff, to the expense of the non-urgent but important stuff! Try to limit mindless web-browsing. If you are in front of screens all day, make time to meditate or do more physically activities out of work hours. I recommend checking out a time-management system called ‘getting things done’. The core philosophy of the system is that you should try to get all information out of your head and captured on paper on electronically as soon as possible. For example, adherents to this system try to either answer an email instantly, or tag/log it so they will have a constantly evolving ‘to do’ list on paper or on a computer so they aren’t putting constant strain on their memory.