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Here's how workers can avoid being overwhelmed by information

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Voice mail, e-mails, conversation notes and must-do to-dos, entrepreneurs and employees alike are besieged by an unrelenting flood of messages, contacts and clips of information. All must be handled, but few require a place in the file cabinet or MyDocuments directory.

People are data-overloaded and time-starved. Many lament only half-jokingly that their poor memories are a result of adult-onset ADD, and three quarters of consumers complain they lack the time to do what they need to get done, noted a recent survey from Yankelovich Inc.

"People have so much stuff that they are saying their lives don't make sense," said Susan Ford Collins, a Miami organizational consultant, and co-author of the book and online course, *Shifting Gears: How you Can Succeed and Lead in the New Workplace*.

"They have to get above the piles of junk and stop to think, `How is this relevant to me?'"

Organizing these clips and bits is critical to staying focused and successful in business and life. A combination of tools and insights called a "trusted system" by organizational consultant and author David Allen, improves organization, boosts data retention and can bring clarity to chaos. Whether it's contact management software, a paper planner or a combination of both, this central repository can create a "single view" that gives people a glimpse into their days, businesses and lives, said Karen Fredricks, owner of Tech Benders LLC, the Boca Raton author of several books on the Act! contact management application.

How do people manage the flood of information? Here, some business people share their strategies.

One `trusted system'

Paul Holstein guesses he gets around 250 e-mails a day. He receives a dozen or more voice mails, as well as messages from employees at CableOrganizer.com, his Fort Lauderdale online retailer of wire and cable organizing solutions.

Microsoft Outlook is Holstein's "trusted system" and repository for every e-mail, voice mail, conversation note, to-do or action item that comes his way. E-mail messages, for example, either remain in his inbox until he acts on them, are dragged and dropped in a folder, or they're deleted. His Outlook Task list -- an ongoing compendium of to-dos Holstein types into his computer -- is categorized by context -- Home, Business, Calls, Errands and is immediately synchronized from his desktop to his home PC and the Palm PDA he carries in his belt. One day, he's reminded to get a document notarized. On another, he's prompted to buy a water filter for his warehouse.

Since his company uses voice over Internet protocol, all voice mail messages are digital; important ones are dropped into Outlook as attachments. All others are deleted.

If Holstein has handwritten notes from a conversation, he parses out action items to place in his task list. Same for any letters or mail that come in. Not surprisingly, his company's slogan is, "Eliminate the clutter."

"Nothing should remain on your desk other than the thing you are working on at the time," he said."Everything else is a distraction."

Employing paper

Anna Talerico's day is a balancing act between business and family. For Joachim de Posada, it's keeping tabs on business opportunities and future consulting and speaking engagements. For both, the "trusted system" is a binder.

For Talerico, it's the Levenger Circa flexible binder she carries everywhere she goes. Business notes, to-dos and actions are scribbled in. Notes from current projects, updates and deadlines are printed out on 81/2-by-11-inch paper and inserted into the binder. Handwritten entries may include notes from a business meeting, or a reminder to shuttle a child to an after-school activity.

"And throughout the week, I add to the lists on paper, and transfer them back to the online project center," said Talerico, executive vice president of ion Interactive, a Boca Raton Web development firm. "Keeping it all in one place is important. Otherwise, my desk becomes a jumble of random meeting notes, stickies, and other loose files with action items associated with them."

His Franklin Planner has been de Posada's solution for more than a decade. As an international speaker and author, de Posada writes notes from any prospect or new contact into the current day on his planner. Voice mail messages or conversation notes are handwritten in; important pages are photocopied and placed in clients' files. If an e-mail, call or even letter requires follow-up action, de Posada notes that on the Task List section for the given day.

At month's end, de Posada follows the Franklin strategy and copies key contacts and notes to a monthly index page. "In 12 pages," he said, "I have every important contact from the entire year."

De Posada augments his planner with AOL. He creates folders in AOL for each client, and jots notes from e-mails into similar categories within his Franklin planner like specific clients or new business prospects. Every few months, de Posada will review the latest e-mails on his laptop as a "tickler" that reminds him to touch base with past clients or renew talks with prospects.

"It really should be called event management, because we can't

manage time," he said. "Nowadays, if you don't have a system, you'll lose more business than through a recession or other business cycle."

Mind-mapping

Richard Israel, a Miami expert in managing information overload, deftly handles what few e-mails, voice mails and other bits of information he receives.

E-mails are answered immediately. If the message is important, he copies it into a new Word document, and saves it in a client or project folder. Original e-mails are then deleted, keeping his inbox uncluttered. Voice mails are written as notes and to-dos in his Quo Vadis month-at-a-glance calendar.

Meeting and conversation notes, however, are "mapped." Israel, co-author with Collins of *Shifting Gears*, is a proponent of Tony Buzan's "mind map" concept. Instead of taking notes at a lunch meeting or seminar, Israel sketches a diagram of the discussion. Starting with a central image of the topic, he then draws lines leading to new areas representing discussions. These pictures, images and key words later will remind him of the event and topics discussed. Each thought branches off the main, central topic, creating a coherent knowledge base relevant to that client or topic, he said.

When he gets back to the office, Israel puts the map in a client folder. If the meeting was about an ongoing project, he'll redraw the map on a large piece of paper, and tape it to his wall. There, he can add new thoughts and ideas to the map. If the map is from a chat, when he talks with the person again, Israel will pull out the map and resume diagramming.

Beyond business, users can mind map in their daily lives, improving recollection and memory, and boosting productivity.

"They begin to think that way over time," Israel said. "It helps them remember what's occurring in the rat race of today. That's what's important."

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