

*What information consumes is rather obvious:
it consumes the attention of its recipients.
Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention
and a need to allocate that attention efficiently
among the overabundance of information sources
that might consume it.*

Herbert Simon, Recipient of Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics¹
and the A.M. Turing Award, the “Nobel Prize of Computer Science”

¹ Simon received the Nobel Prize in 1978 for his contribution to organizational decision making: it is impossible to have perfect and complete information at any given time to make a decision.

The Manhattan A-train was packed for the Christmas season, and as we stepped in for the two-minute ride to the next station and shopping at Macy’s, my friend Justin looked down at his Blackberry as he always did when waiting. He’d had it for less than a week and was already glancing at his inbox every 10-15 minutes.

“Another e-mail from my boss.” Justin didn’t have any reception for his Blackberry, so it took him a full three minutes to respond. In that span of time, his boss had left him two voicemail messages.

It was 8pm on a Saturday.

THE EXPANDING WORKWEEK AND THE INEVITABLE BOTTLENECK

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool. Richard P. Feynman, Nobel Prize-winning physicist

Americans now work approximately eight weeks longer² per year than in 1969—in the space of a single generation—for roughly the same income after adjusting for inflation. The new standard workweek is 70 hours³ and the growth rate is increasing.

The fuel? Instant access to information and instant access to each other.

The problem is clear when we look at the best case scenario: If you get what you want—for example, a promotion or 10% more customers per month—and get 10% more e-mail or phone calls per month as a result, are your behaviors and routines scalable? Can you answer 1,000 e-mails as easily as 100? If not, at what point will you become a bottleneck that creates a permanent backlog of unread and unanswered items?

For me, it was June 14th, 2004.

From August 10th, 2000 to June 14th, 2004, I checked Outlook 100-200 times per day, first as an employee, and later as the founder and CEO of a Silicon Valley-based firm with more than 300 full-time and contracted workers. In June of 2004, I was working from 7am to 9pm, including weekends, and receiving more than 1,500 e-mails per week.

It was unsustainable and 100% unscalable.

Deciding that incremental changes wouldn't solve the problem, on June 14th, 2004, I decided to conduct an experiment at the opposite extreme—I left the US to run the business from wireless locations in more than 20 countries. There was just one rule: I couldn't check e-mail more than once

² "Work, Stress, and Health," National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health Conference, 1999

³ "Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek," Harvard Business Review, December 2006.

per week for 15 months. To be honest, I expected the experiment to fail. Instead, profits increased 30% in the first four weeks alone.

How did it happen? In retrospect it was simple. I had decided to cultivate the rarest of skills in a world of infinite interruption: selective ignorance.

Selective Ignorance and the Low-Information Diet

Though selective ignorance has several facets, we'll focus on the low-information e-mail diet (here forward called the "low-information diet"), as e-mail is the single greatest time waster in modern life. Before we get into specific guidelines, the two fundamental principles of selective ignorance are worth mentioning:

- 1.** If you don't define your goals clearly, everything seems important and requires action. If you define your goals clearly, especially your single most critical goal, almost all things are of little or no importance and few things require action.
- 2.** Trying to make everyone happy—besides being impossible—is the surest way to make yourself miserable.

There are then three specific steps for following the low-information diet that we'll explore in descending order of importance: decreasing frequency, decreasing volume, and increasing speed.

STEP 1: DECREASE FREQUENCY

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man. George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists

Stoner vs. e-mailer—who wins?

In 2005, a psychiatrist at King's College in London administered IQ tests to three groups: the first did nothing but perform the IQ test, the second was distracted by e-mail and ringing phones and the third was stoned on marijuana. Not surprisingly, the first group did better than the other two by an average of 10 points. The e-mailers, on the other hand, did worse than the stoners by an average of 6 points. ([BBC News article](#))

There is a psychological switching of gears that can require up to 45 minutes to resume a major task that has been interrupted. More than a quarter of each 9-5 period (28%, or 134.4 minutes) is consumed by such interruptions⁴, and 40% of people interrupted go on to a new task without finishing the one that was interrupted. This is how we end up with 20 windows open on our computers and nothing completed at 5pm.

Multi-tasking is dead. It never worked and it never will. Intelligent people love to sing its praises because it gives them permission to avoid the much more challenging alternative: focusing on one thing.

“Single-tasking,” creating an environment that permits the start-to-finish completion of high-impact tasks, will be the defining feature of top performers in a world of ADD-enabling technologies. But how do single-taskers prevent the trivial many from interrupting the critical few?

⁴ “The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity,” Jonathan B. Spira and Joshua B. Feintuch, Basex, 2005

One word: batching.

Batching is scheduling the completion of time-consuming but necessary tasks at set times, as infrequently as possible, between which we let them accumulate. This can be done with everything from voicemail to invoicing, but here's how you batch e-mail:

1. Turn off the audible alert if you have one on Outlook or a similar program and turn off automatic send/receive, which delivers e-mails to your inbox as soon as someone sends them.
2. Set up an auto-responder that permits you to check e-mail twice per day, once at 12 noon or just prior to lunch, and again at 4pm. 12pm and 4pm are times that ensure you will have the most responses from previously sent email. Never check email first thing in the morning⁵. Instead, complete your most important task before lunch to avoid using hunger or reading e-mail as an excuse to put off the important (usually also the most uncomfortable). Here is a template you can use:

⁵This habit alone can change your life. It seems small but has an enormous effect.

