

Stop the world – I want to get off! (Hurry up, holidays)

Robyn Pearce



As the end of the year looms, how are you hanging in? It's not just an age thing – the world *is* speeding up. Almost everyone I speak to is finding it progressively harder to keep on top of the miscellany of “squeaky doors”. We live with an explosion of social networking sites, ever-ringing mobiles, texting and the diminishing attention span of people in an over-stimulated, attention-truncated world dominated by interruptions. No wonder people of all ages feel overwhelmed most of the time. Modern communication methods are amazing – but every wonderful invention has a dark side.

Filter the crap

One of the core skills to help us manage the *Too much to do* syndrome is to develop our own personal crap-filtering system.

Consider this: much of what comes our way is really not very important, so why invest our lives into looking at it, reading it, thinking about it (whatever “it” might be). For example, a metropolitan weekend paper today has more information in it than most people up to the end

of the 18th century had access to in their entire lives. And what impact on your mental state and well-being does a heavy diet of TV have? Many hours can be saved per week by eliminating most newspapers and TV.

Is knowledge what we want?

Not so many years ago a core study skill was to be able to cram in a lot of knowledge. But is *knowledge* really what we want? I believe that it's *wisdom* we should be seeking. And that won't come while we fill our time and our heads with trivia, while we allow the immediate to intrude at the expense of the long-term. The world is drowning in trivial miscellanea. To cope with it we need to become good at filtering information, not retaining it.

The critical skill in handling large chunks of information is to become a quick analyser and decision-maker.

Some key questions to ask yourself

- ◆ *What is my highest priority – right now?*
- ◆ *What one thing, if I were to focus on it right*

now, would make the greatest difference?

- ◆ *Is this information or activity going to help me with anything soon or would my time be better spent somewhere else?*

Helicopter thinking

Consider a helicopter – with its combination of up and down movement. The up view gets it above a situation for a bird's eye view. The down view gives close attention at a micro level to specific activities on the ground.

How can we replicate the helicopter in our day-to-day work? Have you ever noticed that when you step away for a few minutes from an intense task that you come back with a more objective approach? Perhaps another angle presents itself. Or a detail you've overlooked has popped into the fore-front of your mind. When you find yourself grinding away in low-level activity, buried in emails, feeling guilty about the big jobs or important long-term projects not completed, it's time to step into your mental helicopter and do a lift-off – away from the cluttered desk and the everlasting demands of others.

Four simple strategies to manage overload

1 Step away

If you're at your desk as you read this article, as soon as you've finished reading, practice it now. Put your hands on the edge of your desk, push away from your seat and stand up. Take a deep breath to aerate your whole body, look away from your workstation and have a really good stretch.

Now, move out of the room for a minute or two. Go to the loo, make yourself a cup of coffee, take a walk outside for a few minutes – it doesn't matter what, as long as it's away from your work environment.

While you're disengaged from your work, ask yourself questions such as:

- ◆ *What am I trying to achieve here?*
- ◆ *What's the purpose and desired outcomes?*
- ◆ *Am I really doing the right work?*
- ◆ *What are the key elements I must focus on?*
- ◆ *What can I delegate, side-step or ignore in order to act on the things that will give the greatest return on the time I'm investing?*

2 Compressed time

You know that work expands to fit the time available. It also works the other way. Practice compressing time – allowing less than usual to do a set job. Think of how efficient you are when you're going on holiday. Isn't it amazing how much you achieve in that last day or so?

Recently, one of my clients, talking about a website makeover, calculated that she needed two solid weeks of work to get the new copy written. Problem is, she's too busy with day-to-day activities ever to get two uninterrupted weeks. It's a pipe-dream that isn't going to happen.

Her initial belief was that the site couldn't

go live until the job was done. Not so. When we analysed it, she had one particular product that, if profiled on the existing website, would meet a huge untapped need in the marketplace. The income from this product has the potential to transform her business. She's now made a commitment to other people and this commitment is helping her focus.

“What one thing, if I were to focus on it right now, would make the greatest difference?”

3 Who can you pace yourself against?

You probably know the lines in *“Click Go The Shears”* –

*Click go the shears, boys – click, click, click
Wide is his blow and his hands move quick
The ringer looks around and is beaten by a blow
And curses the old snagger with the blue-bellied yoe.*

Shearers are masters of compressing time – call it time and motion if you like. They race against the clock and their fellow shearers the whole time. In the song the ringer, or top shearer, lost focus for a moment and was beaten by an older man cunning enough to grab a sheep with no wool on its belly.

We don't often have people to pace ourselves against, but we can learn to pace ourselves. Every day find something to practice compression on. Ask yourself: *“How can I do this task in less time than usual?”* There are always short-cuts and things we can condense.

4 Don't start the day with the easy things

Yesterday I was working with the partner of a large law firm. He's a man in his late thirties – and like many people on my courses and at my speeches, has been in the habit of starting his

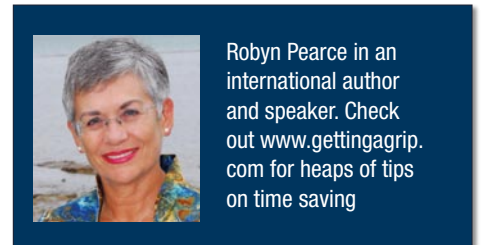
day's tasks with the easy things. Result – the day is spent knee-jerking from one low-level activity to another. As a consequence his non-billable hours are far too high and the other partners are getting cranky. The solution is to make the first few hours of the day the time when high-value work is done.

You might be thinking: *“That's all very well for a lawyer, but how can an educationalist do that?”* First thing in the day, a teacher typically prepares for their classes. Many good principals head off round the playground before school. And school secretaries and administrators certainly need to wait until the rush dies down before they can get to higher-value tasks.

Choose the time that works for you, but as soon as possible get something done on a high-value task or project, even if it's only for half-an-hour.

If we think: *“I'll just get these little jobs out of the way so I can get to the big jobs”* the big jobs will still wait at the end of the week. Instead, by making progress on higher-value projects earlier in the day we release endorphins, feel more effective and we feel a sense of control; it's sure strategy to overcome the *Too much to do syndrome*.

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