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# **When Office Technology Overwhelms, Get Organized**

By DAVID ALLEN

**HOW do you think most workers would respond if you asked them, “Do you feel more productive now than you did several years ago?” I doubt that the answer would be a resounding yes. In fact, even as workplace technology and processes steadily improve, many professionals feel less productive than ever.**

**It may seem a paradox, but these very tools are undermining our ability to get work done. They are causing us to become paralyzed by the dizzying number of options that they spawn.**

**Is there a way out of this quandary? Yes, but it’s not going to come from the usual quarters. To be successful in the new world of work, we need to create a structure for capturing, clarifying and organizing all the forces that assail us; and to ensure time and space for thinking, reflecting and decision making.**

**Most professionals are still using their subjective, internal mental worlds to try to keep it all together, but that’s a poor way to navigate the new work environment. It results in unclear, distracted and disorganized thinking, and leaves frustration, stress and undermined self-confidence in its wake.**

**Workers need a set of best practices that is sorely lacking in the professional world. Without it, we are seeing a growing angst — even a sense of desperation — in the workplace, as more employees feel that there is no rest and no way out. (In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised to see resurging interest in Sartre’s books and Beckett’s plays as a result.)**

**These are the kinds of comments I hear in my work as a consultant:**

- **“I’m overwhelmed, and with all the changes going on here, it’s getting worse. There aren’t enough hours in the day to do my job.”**
- **“I have new responsibilities that demand creative and strategic thought, but I’m not getting to them.”**
- **“I have too many meetings to attend, and I can’t get any ‘real’ work done.”**
- **“I have too many e-mails, and, given day-to-day urgencies, the backlog keeps growing.”**
- **“I feel like I’m not giving the right amount of attention to what’s most important.”**

***And here's a common kicker, for those willing to admit it:***

***"I just can't keep going like this."***

***One could argue that these kinds of complaints are as old as work itself, and that no matter how productive we are, we'll always find something to grumble about. That's human nature. But a closer examination of these grievances reveals that they all relate to a sense of suboptimal performance. The core message is, "I don't feel good about what I'm not getting done."***

***TO better understand the realities of the accelerated work world, it helps to remember how far we have come. Imagine if you didn't have a spreadsheet on your computer: How much effort would you need to produce the computations you can now perform in minutes?***

***Fifty years ago, how many hours would you have spent wandering library stacks and poring over volumes of materials to find information you can now get in a few moments online?***

***When there was no next-day delivery, e-mail or Web conferencing, how much energy would you expend traveling to meetings to discuss issues, make decisions and produce results now accomplished in short order, with people all around the world?***

***Productivity gains have not been limited to technology and transportation. Over time, better understanding of business processes has allowed companies to accomplish more with less effort and resources, and with more focus on quality, creativity and innovation. And support for workers' satisfaction continues to spread, in forms like flexible schedules, more comfortable office space, and a range of professional and personal development programs.***

***Today, we really do live in a much cooler world in which to work, travel and communicate. So if we're getting so much more bang for the buck, with this exponential leap forward in technology and support, why aren't we reaping the benefits of productivity day to day as individuals?***

***The problem is that better overall productivity in an organization may not translate into increased productivity for an individual worker.***

***Though one person may now be producing the previous results of three, she's not being paid three times as much. That's the whole point of companies using technology and other improvements: fewer people are now needed for the same results.***

***But the workers who remain also tend to have much more responsibility. And they can't just comfort themselves with the notion that their companies are more efficient than they used to be, because all of their competitors have the same new tools, and are using them to gain any advantage they can.***

***Cranking out widgets is one thing; deciding which widgets need cranking first, and in what quantity, is quite another — especially if you are now charged with continually improving the system, or determining whether you should even be cranking out those widgets at all.***

***It can be a recipe for frustration, as employees feel overwhelmed by their companies' very progress. And the problems and logistics of workers' personal lives add yet another layer of complexity.***

***So, given all the obstacles, how do you find your way to a productive state — the feeling that you're doing exactly what you should be doing, with a sense of relaxed and focused control? What's needed is a system that creates space to think, to reflect, to review, to integrate and to connect dots.***

***As Dr. Nicolas von Rosty, head of executive development at Siemens, once told me, "You must be able to be present, not distracted, to be able to trust your inner wisdom and make quick decisions without others' input or waiting for perfection."***

***How do you find the space needed to do that? By integrating all the chaos of the workplace and staying focused on the most important things, as they relate to your goals, direction, values and desired outcomes. You must constantly recalibrate your resources to generate the best results, and to say "not now" to what's less important.***

***WE are not born doing this. It's a focus that must be learned. And its results won't show up by themselves. You can, however, use a sequence of five events to optimize your focus and resources, whether you're trying to get it together in your kitchen, your conversation, your contract, your company or your country.***

***• Capture everything that has your attention, in your work and your personal life, in writing. Maybe it's your departmental budget, a meeting with the new boss, an overdue vacation, or just the need to buy new tires and a jar of mayonnaise. For the typical professional, it can take one to six hours to "empty the attic" of your head. It may seem daunting, but this exercise invariably leads to greater focus and control.***

***• Clarify what each item means to you. Decide what results you want and what actions — if any — are required. If you simply make a list and stop there, without putting the items in context, you'll be stuck in the territory of compulsive list-making, which ultimately won't relieve the pressure. What's the next action when it comes to your budget? The next step in arranging your vacation? Applying this simple but rigorous model puts you in the driver's seat; otherwise, your lists will hold your psyche hostage. And keep in mind that much progress can be made and stress relieved by applying the magic two-minute rule — that any action that can be finished in two minutes should be done in the moment.***

***• Organize reminders of your resulting to-do lists — for the e-mails you need to send, the phone calls you need to make, the meetings you need to arrange, the at-home tasks you need to complete. Park the inventory of all your projects in a convenient place.***

**• Regularly review and reflect on the whole inventory of your commitments and interests, and bring it up to date. As your needs change, what can move to the front burner, and what can go further back? Make these decisions while considering your overall principles, goals and accountabilities. Schedule a two-hour, weekly operational review, allowing space to clean up, catch up and do some reflective overseeing of the landscape, for all work and personal goals, commitments and activities.**

**• Finally, deploy your attention and resources appropriately.**

**Does our productivity really depend on this basic set of behaviors and thought processes? So it seems. Everyone is already half-trying to do all of this, all the time. But many people just haven't identified the process, or applied it.**

**I have never seen anyone apply these practices, with some degree of commitment and application, and not find significant improvement in focus, control and results. The technology, the organizational goals, the quirks and turbulence of external realities — these become things to manage, not a hoped-for source of productivity itself.**

**I have found that most professionals take action based on whatever is the latest and loudest in their universe, as opposed to a making a conscious, intelligent choice springing from the model I've described. This day-to-day, minute-to-minute arena of "reaction versus pro-action" is where the scales tip to "productive" or "unproductive."**

**ONE possible path to that feeling of control is to return to a make-it-or-move-it existence. Find work that requires little if any thinking, but merely reacts and responds to what presents itself. That's a real option: I once met a senior vice president in a global pharmaceutical company who, after taking an early retirement package, became a duck at Disney World. In such a job, it was probably much easier to have a good day at work, and then leave it behind.**

**But most people won't choose that path, partly because such jobs seldom pay what the figure-it-out-yourself ones do. And we need this second kind of job if we are to afford the children, education, hobbies, clothes and urban lifestyles whose options are themselves contributing to life's overwhelming complexities.**

**And even if you tried to downgrade your work to something simpler, you'd probably bring along the itch to make it something more.**

**I've often made the point in my seminars that having a "bait shop in the Berkshires" is always an option for making life less stressful. But a client once told me that a friend of his had actually done that — by cashing out of Wall Street, going to the Berkshires and buying a fishing camp. When my client visited him, the guy was wrapped around his computer, on the Internet, trying to find the right baits to buy and sell, trying to figure out how to advertise his camp, and so on.**

***In other words, our attraction to a world of infinite possibility, information and complexity is here to stay. The challenge is how to participate productively in this new and turbulent world, and not be paralyzed by it.***

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