Driven to Distraction: Surviving Information Overload in the Age of Connectivity

Vince Yauger, AIA, CCCA, CCM, LEED AP, PMP
University of Texas at Dallas
Richardson, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

We live in an age of connectivity, the consequence of which is we work in an environment filled with constant interruptions and distractions. If not properly managed, instant access to information can bog down project managers, resulting in decreased efficiency and increased project risk. Most Project Managers deal with multiple projects, so the ability to stay current with project metrics is critical to project success. Yet the sheer magnitude of information can be overwhelming.

In this paper, we explore tools to effectively sift through this mountain of details, focusing on what is most important to the success of your projects.

DEALING WITH INFORMATION OVERLOAD

The rate of technological advancement over the last thirty years is overwhelming. Contrast changes in communication in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office Communication in 1978</th>
<th>Office Communications in 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Letters (snail mail)</td>
<td>• Phone (VOIP, LL, cell, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facsimiles</td>
<td>• Video calls (Skype, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Routing Slips (courier)</td>
<td>• Email (multiple accounts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Phone Conversations (land lines)</td>
<td>• Teleconferencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Face-to-Face (meetings, etc.)</td>
<td>• Videoconferencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Texting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social Media Alerts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Letters (snail mail endures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Face-to-Face (meetings, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today’s project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 12th Annual University of Texas at Dallas Project Management Symposium in May 2018. It is republished here with permission of the author and conference organizers.

While the benefits of modern technology are unquestionable, an unintended consequence of instant access to all this data is “information overload.” This proliferation of helpful technology provides helpful tools that can quickly become demanding taskmasters.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you feel like you’re always on call?
- Do constant interruptions disrupt your work flow?
- Do you check work email even when not at work?
- What does “time off” mean to you?
- Do you ever think “if I don’t do it, it won’t get done?”
- Is your phone a time-saving or time-wasting device?

Modern meetings often include both computer and cell phone usage. How effective do you think the communication is in meetings where everyone is distracted by their cell phones? Is anyone really paying attention? If not, what is the point of meeting in the first place?

Ever had someone in a meeting answer their cell phone, then say “I can’t talk now – I’m in a meeting?” Are you taking full advantage of the capabilities of your smart phone? Like, say, voicemail? If it’s critical that you take the call, you could step outside before answering the phone. While response by Text is a more discreet way to deal with inability to answer calls, it still involves you being distracted in meetings.

Information overload can be further complicated by ineffective or political management. Many employees currently in management roles (leadership) advanced up from the PM ranks. They may have great technical skills but lack leadership training and experience. How many PM’s typically receive HR and employee management training? Technical skills alone may not prepare you for leadership.

**SOME INCONVENIENT TRUTHS**

- The fate of the free world does not depend upon you being immediately accessible by phone or email at all times
- You work with flawed human beings – you are also one of them
- Every team is dysfunctional – some are just better at it than others
- Technology is here to stay – your sanity hangs on your ability to manage information efficiently

**OPTIONS FOR MANAGING INFORMATION OVERLOAD**

What can you do to cope with the deluge of information? Well, you could work harder, put in longer work hours, learn to multitask, avoid technology, avoid meetings, ban the use of cell phones in meetings, go completely off the grid (become a “Prepper”), or return to proven “old school” methods (i.e. – everything on paper).
Is working harder (or longer) really helping? Sometimes more is better, sometimes it isn’t. Of course, if you want it done right, you must do it yourself! After all, you are a Renaissance Man – you are good at everything! And you can multitask too!

So, is multitasking effective? According to Douglas Merrill in a Forbes article dated August 17, 2012 “Unfortunately, our brains just aren’t equipped for multitasking tasks that do require brainpower. Our short-term memories can only store between five and nine things at once. ... Instead of actually helping you, multitasking works against you. It’s making you less efficient, not more.”

**A DIFFERENT APPROACH**

Manage technology based (cell phone) distractions by:

- Turn cell phone ringer to vibrate only (and leave it that way)
- Disable alerts from social media sites, email, etc.
- Disable alerts from any other apps except “emergency notifications”
- Put the phone away during meetings (or leave at your desk)

Use best practices for keeping meetings focused and attendees actively engaged:

- Establish Rules of Engagement (explain our expectations) & enforce rules consistently
- Head-off side discussions
- Respect the speaker / Don’t interrupt
- Have a clear agenda / Stay on the agenda
- Avoid bogging down in minutia
- Be a grown-up – agree to disagree and avoid making it “personal”

In addition, learn to harness technology to work more efficiently by adopting early organization of project tasks, understand personnel management best practices, and learn how to prioritize tasks.

**THE ART OF TRIAGE**

Triage is often associated with the grim task of assessing medical injuries to determine the severity of injuries, followed by application of scarce resources to prioritize treatment thereby saving the most people. Employ triage (saving what you can) by mastering the art of prioritization. Knowing what is most important enables you to focus on the key tasks that are critical to project success.

Business triage applies similar principles to struggling enterprises and individual projects. In practice, this is the process of evaluating realized risks, and making determinations designed to “right the ship,” thereby salvaging the operation or project. Unfortunately, some enterprises may be beyond saving.
SOME MORE INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

- You can’t avoid all risk – what you can do is plan for and manage risk when it occurs
- You can’t save them all / You can’t do it all yourself
- You will never have enough time to perform every task that is expected of you – The Good News is - you don’t have to do it all

Maybe your job doesn’t involve making life-or-death decisions, yet these triage principles can also be applied to Project Risk Management.

Q: How then do you determine what tasks are most important to project success?

A: The PMBOK Guide 6th Edition lays out recommendations for project risk management processes that directly address this question...

RISK MANAGEMENT

Per the Project Management Institute’s – Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide 6th Edition:

"Project Risk Management includes the processes of conducting risk management planning, identification, analysis, response planning and monitoring risk on a project. The objectives of project risk management are to increase the probability and/or impact of positive risks, and to decrease the probability and/or impact of negative risks, in order to optimize the chances of project success."

Understanding risk and planning responses before the risks are realized are critical components of effective project management.

Project Risk Management Processes as defined by PMI include:

11.1 Plan Risk Management – defining how to conduct risk management activities for a project

11.2 Identify Risks – process for determining which risks may affect the project

11.3 Perform Qualitative Risk Analysis – prioritizing risks for probability of occurrence and impact

11.4 Perform Quantitative Risk Analysis – numerically analyzing the effect of identified risks

11.5 Plan Risk Responses – developing options and actions to reduce threats to project objectives

11.6 Implement Risk Responses – process of implementing risk response plans

11.7 Monitor Risks – The process of monitoring the implementation of agreed-upon risk response plans.

The output of the Identify Risks Process is the Risk Register. The Risk Register begins as a list of possible risks that the project could encounter. Some recommended best practices:

- Research similar external projects
- Include risks realized on previous internal projects
- Consider relevant environmental and cultural risks unique to the project
- Include Subject Matter Expert (SME) input (i.e. expert judgment) when developing

The risk register should also include a list of responses to the identified risks. Best practices include:

- Include historical data from previous internal projects where similar risks were realized
- Incorporate lessons learned and other historical information from similar external projects
- Subject Matter Expert (SME) input (i.e. expert judgment) when developing response plans

The next step is to develop response plans to address the risks should they occur.

The PMBOK Guide notes strategies for planning and responding to risks, both negative and positive.
11.5.2.4 Strategies for Threats

- **Escalate** – appropriate where the proposed response would exceed the project manager’s authority.
- **Avoid** – project team acts to eliminate the threat (examples include extending the schedule, changing the strategy, or eliminating scope). Most radical avoidance strategy is to shut down the project.
- **Transfer** – project team shifts impact of a potential threat to a third party, together with ownership of the response.
- **Mitigate** – acting to reduce the probability of occurrence or impact of a risk.
- **Accept** – project team decides to acknowledge the risk and not take any action unless the risk occurs.


11.5.2.5 Strategies for Opportunities

- **Escalate** – appropriate where the proposed response would exceed the project manager’s authority.
- **Exploit** – eliminate the uncertainty associated with a particular upside by ensuring the opportunity definitely happens.
- **Share** – allocating some or all of the ownership of the opportunity to a third party who is best able to capture the opportunity for the benefit of the project.
- **Enhance** – increase the probability and/or the positive impacts of an opportunity.
- **Accept** – being willing to take advantage of the opportunity if it arises, *but not actively pursuing it*.


**TYPES OF RESPONSE PLANS**

- Emergency Action Plans (EAP)
  - First Response Plans
  - Emergency Drills (Practicing responses, analyzing results, refining plans)
- Contingency Plans
  - Time (Schedule – project float, pull-planning, etc.)
  - Cost (Contingency budgets)
  - Scope (Bid alternates, phasing, shell space, etc.)
- Recovery Plans
Now that we have our plans in place, we are ready to deal with an actual risk occurrence. “Implement Risk Responses is the process of implementing agreed-upon risk response plans.”

**Figure 11-18. Implement Risk Responses: Inputs, Tools & Techniques, and Outputs**


Are you rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic? Wikipedia defines this as “doing something pointless or insignificant that will soon be overtaken by events, or that contributes nothing to the solution of a current problem.” How do you know if the implemented response is having the desired effect? You need to monitor the implementation and adjust as needed.

“Monitor Risks is the process of monitoring implementation of agreed-upon risk response plans, tracking identified risks, identifying and analyzing new risks, and evaluating risk process effectiveness...”
REFOCUSING ON THE MISSION

In the day-to-day blur of completing project management tasks, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture. Refocusing on the ultimate goal can be as simple as rereading your approved Project Charter. “The Project Charter provides a preliminary delineation of roles and responsibilities, outlines the project objectives, identifies the main stakeholders, and defines the authority of the project manager. It serves as a reference of authority for the future of the project.” – PMBOK Guide, 6th Edition

BACK TO BASICS

“If you are a pro tennis player, sooner or later you will find yourself in a slump – a time period when nothing seems to work, when even the simplest shots become a problem, when confidence is nowhere to be found. As frustrating as it is, it is part of the game. Go Back to Basics – Make Sure you are Moving your Feet, Watching the Ball all the Way to Contact, and Swinging Smoothly.” - Getting out of a Slump (Advice for Competitive Tennis Players) by Edward Giffenig. The same rule applies to Project Managers – it pays to return to the basics of project management on a regular basis. A good starting point would be to read the PMBOK Guide, 6th Edition – updated in 2017.

SETTING DOWN THE CHECKLISTS

While it is great to have standard processes and procedures, you need to periodically ask yourself the following questions. Have your tools become your taskmaster? Are you a slave to your to-do checklist? Has your focus on process and procedures caused you to lose sight of
what you are really trying to accomplish? You can avoid bogging down by conducting a regular evaluation of process effectiveness.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE TEAMS

In your quest to build high-performing teams, do you attempt to “clone” the desired skill set? Even with similar education and training, individuals do not perform at the same level. That is because teams are made up of people, not “human resources.” The reality is that you will need to build a “jigsaw puzzle” team of diverse people with unique experience and skill sets.

HONING YOUR PEOPLE SKILLS

Does your PM toolbox contain only hammers? The quote “If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail” addresses the problem associated with limited managerial skills. To be truly effective building teams, you must possess both technical and leadership skills. How is your emotional intelligence (EQ)? Are you also honing your “people” skills by fostering healthy emotional intelligence? If you manage people, take the initiative to seek additional training in leadership and personnel management. But don’t neglect your technical skills – they tend to be “use it or lose it.”

PREEMPTIVE LAZINESS

As an avowed hyper-organizer, I practice what is known as “preemptive laziness.” The idea is that by organizing a project early, you can fend off distractions later on, thereby maintaining your efficiency. An important part of this process is time prioritization, rather than time management. Invest the time upfront needed to efficiently organize your projects, tasks, and schedule.

TIME PRIORITIZATION

Time management is the process of planning and exercising conscious control of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase effectiveness, efficiency or productivity. While this can be helpful, it can also lead to “burn-out” if overdone. Rather than scheduling every moment of each day, prioritizing your time on the most important tasks each day may serve you better.

Sometimes you need a block of time for linear work flow versus working with constant interruptions. Finding a restful space to escape can be helpful, but you may need to turn off your cell phone to receive the full benefit. Not only is it okay to “disconnect” from the web, email and your social media “connections” on a regular basis, it may in fact be crucial to maintaining good mental health. Remember that one size does not fit all. Experiment with different places and techniques, find what works for you, and take a well-deserved break.

CHANNEL QUIRKS INTO STRENGTHS

Most of us have quirks that may have a detrimental impact on our effectiveness in the working world. Tendencies such as obsessive compulsive, attention deficit, hyper-busyness, hyper-
organizing, hoarding, and introversion can adversely affect your work performance. Please note that what I am referring to are not clinically diagnosed mental disorders, but rather tendencies that can be managed without medical treatment.

It is very difficult to change how you feel or react to certain things. Brute force attempts to change feelings or tendencies don’t work. So how do you manage these tendencies? For example, your gut-level reaction to the word “exercise” is negative. Perhaps you associate it with bad experiences growing up. You may have no idea why you react this way, but years spent trying to change the way you feel have been unsuccessful. As a result, you avoid exercise and your health suffers accordingly.

Why not work around the obstacle? If you like to dance, but hate to exercise, then call it “dance,” move past the mental obstacle and have fun getting fit. This same technique can be applied to other tendencies, thereby turning a quirk into an asset. Learning to recognize and channel these tendencies to productive ends will improve your own performance and can help you build high-performing teams.

CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

Critical to managing information overload are clear and concise communication best practices. Are you emphasizing the right points? And are you using technology wisely? Email exchanges that look like “ping-pong” matches are counterproductive.

Some rules of thumb for efficient email communication:

- Include enough context so that the receiver can actually respond with the information you need
- Keep it concise and to the point (Two paragraph maximum)
- Explain exactly what you want and when you need it
- Use attachments to provide more detail (if needed)
- Only use acronyms if you are certain your reader understands their meaning
- Stick to the facts (if you need colorful metaphors, then your case may be weak)
- Use templates to create custom groups and consistent message format

A word of caution on template use – templates are great at proliferating errors! Be sure to check your work so that the templates increase your efficiency without undermining your credibility.

Some forms of communication are more effective than others. In a “perfect world,” you could use the same tools with equal effectiveness with everyone. In practice, the best form to use may vary depending upon your target audience.

Communication best practices include:

- Face-to-face if possible (BEST)
- Video conference
• Phone call
• Follow-up with confirming written message (email or formal letter)

Why do we recommend face-to-face meetings or video conferencing? Because much of our communication is non-verbal (i.e. – body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone, inflection, etc.). Without this feedback, it is more difficult to communicate both facts and intent. Phone calls are more effective than email communication alone. Why? Like a face-to-face or video call, the listener hears not just your words but reads intent through your use of inflection, tone and pauses.

As I tend to organize my thoughts best in writing, if I could, I would use only email to communicate with my stakeholders. However, as noted above, email is the least effective method of communication. Therefore, we recommend you push past your comfort zone (favorite method) and develop skills in many different forms of communication. This will improve the likelihood of your message being understood as you intended.

SUMMARY

Take the opportunity to create order from the chaos of information overload by managing the flow of information & minimizing distractions from your communication devices. Learn the art of triage and master prioritization so that your effort is directed on the most important tasks. Step back from your task lists on a regular basis and refocus on your mission. Understand your tendencies (and those of your team members) and learn to channel quirks into productive outcomes. And finally, always include context in your messages and practice clear and concise communication skills.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.


About the Author

Vince Yauger, AIA, CCCA, CCM, LEEP AP, PMP

Texas, USA

Vince Yauger has 37-years’ experience in design and construction, working as a project manager for both private industry and the government sector. His construction experience covers a broad spectrum of building types, ranging from small residences to multi-million dollar multi-family high-rise, airport terminals, and higher education projects. Vince currently serves as the Senior Resident Construction Manager for the North and East Texas Regions of the University of Texas System Office of Facilities Planning and Construction - managing new construction and major renovation projects at the University of Texas at Dallas campus since 2007.


Past speaking engagements include the 2017 UT PM Symposium, one of several keynote address at the 2015 UTD PM Symposium, 2016 Virtual Construction and Field Technology Conference, UTD Applied Project Management Forum, 2013 Texas Society of Architects Convention, 2013 UTD Facilities Management Conference, and multiple UT System OFPC annual conferences. He also serves as a guest lecturer for UTD’s PM core curriculum program, speaking to groups of foreign graduate students visiting UT Dallas, and conducting construction site tours on campus.

Vince Yauger can be contacted at vyauger@utsystem.edu