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Triple Overload and what you can do about it.

EVERNOTE + think **productive**
WORKSHOPS THAT WORK

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Work isn't a value. It's a process.

Back in the day, when laptops were just becoming available there was a print ad that turned out to be remarkably prophetic.

It was a mountain-top scene with a beautiful sky and a killer view. In this remote location we see a person working on a laptop. A compelling picture with an obvious disconnect: what is this person with a computer doing on this mountaintop?

The headline packed a serious punch. It read:

Now You Can Work Anywhere. Bummer.

It turns out this scene is a dramatic example of where we are right now. Ubiquitous broadband and powerful software have had an undeniable effect on the way we work, which is pretty much all the time.

If you'd like to avoid technology overload and get back to owning your workday, you're in the right place.

Are you having "one of those days" everyday?

It starts early. Actually, did yesterday ever end? Your boss doesn't really care about the 150 emails you haven't answered. Slack is blowing up. Client calls are always urgent. Lunch? You're kidding. Coffee isn't helping. You're chasing your tail and your co-workers. And at the end of the day, all you've really done is move some data from one place to another hoping you've connected enough dots that something, somewhere actually happens. So, it's time to answer the questions that define our age:

Where does all the time go?
Why are you always so busy?

How did we get here?

The last two decades have seen massive changes in the way people work. In fact, the much-discussed "digital transformation" is really just getting started. It certainly can't be stopped. And so far, we're not handling it all that well. It helps to get a little historical perspective.

If this is the 4th Industrial Revolution, are we winning?

The First Industrial Revolution, steam and mechanical production, started around 1780. Companies and business leaders had to adapt to new circumstances and learn new skills. The same upheavals occurred during the Second Industrial Revolution, electricity and mass production, around 1870. The Third, IT and automation, started around 1970[1]. All of these events took place at roughly 100 year intervals.

Right now, According to Klaus Schwab[2], "...a Fourth Industrial Revolution is building on the Third. It's the digital revolution, that has been occurring since the middle of the last century. This new revolution is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres." Wow.

Don't Blink. You could miss the next big thing.

One thing that definitely characterizes the current technological revolution is speed. And more than speed, it's also acceleration. Massive improvements in processing power and the low cost of data storage have enabled researchers and entrepreneurs to innovate almost at will. The way we experience this is: big things happen fast and more often.

Fifty years ago, a board of directors had to deal with a maximum of one large, truly relevant change during his or her tenure. But now, a new breakthrough seems to occur every four to five years, like the Internet, Wi-Fi, mobile phones, robotics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, just to name a few[3].

> What are the business implications of the massive number of changes we all have to undergo? How do we deal with this situation of constant information overload? While our human hardware (brain, eyes, ears, mouth) remains the same, we are faced with more changes and more information than the world has ever seen.

If it's not one thing, it's three.

Right after World War II Buckminster Fuller predicted that knowledge doubling was taking about 25 years. Right now the estimate is that the store of global knowledge doubles every 12 months. Pretty shocking until you hear that the current projection is that data doubling will soon take place in about 12 hours. This all comes with some not so wonderful symptoms. Three to be exact.

THREAT #1

Data Overload:

Various research papers[4][5][6] indicate that because of data overload, the average knowledge worker wastes about *2.5 hours per day searching* for information, which is not productive at all.

THREAT #2

Communication Overload:

Cross[7] shows in his HBR article that knowledge workers spend about *80% of their labor time communicating or collaborating* through emails, meetings, chat, and messenger. As a result, not much time remains to do deep work[8] which is considered the most valuable contribution of a knowledge worker.

THREAT #3

Cognitive Overload:

Almost a decade ago, Pattison's[9] as well as Hemp's[10] research revealed that a knowledge worker gets *interrupted or switches tasks every 3-5 minutes on average*, leading to a very unhealthy cognitive overload, and finally exhaustion.

All three forms of overload together represent a serious challenge for productivity not to mention health issues like burnout. The chart below offers a simple overview of the triple overload challenge.

SITUATION	IMPACT
Data Overload Data Doubling Curve is at 14 months today, forecasted to be less than 1 month by 2020.	**Too Much Searching** 2.5h Searching for Information Per Day.
Communication Overload **80% of Working Time** Spent For Communication (Meetings, Email, Chat, Social Media, Etc.)	**No Time to Think** Not Much Time Left For Actual Work, i.e. Deep Work.
Cognitive Overload **5 minutes max** between interruptions prevents getting things done	**Burnout!** Exhaustion, Burnout and Lower/Limited Output/Productivity.

For a business, the Triple Overload is not only bad regarding the unhappiness it causes in the team, but it also has a massive financial impact. Example: 2.5 hours of searching is about 30% of your salary cost! Further, the triple overload leads to exhaustion, which is one of the main reasons for burnouts.

Thanks for scaring me to death. Any solutions?

Yes. We've given this issue a great deal of thought, and gathered together the best advice we could find and hope that your experience with the "triple threat" can be eased by some of these ideas. They come in three flavors. Psychological. Technological. And Team Building.

From Psychology

1. Protect your best attention

There are plenty of old clichés like "every minute counts" and "time is the most valuable commodity", but the truth is, your ability to add value in your work changes throughout the day. And attention is a more scarce resource than time. The science of decision-fatigue and studies on the effect of "information overload" tell us that what really matters are those hours in the day when you have your best attention available. For most of us, it amounts to no more than two to three hours each day.

The trick is to develop an awareness around when you're at your best, and vigorously protect your best-attention-time so you can do your best work. Reduce or remove distractions: get out of the email inbox, put your phone in your bag, and if your colleagues are the biggest distraction, perhaps it's time to make yourself intentionally unavailable to really give yourself focus. Rethinking "time management" is really about "attention management" and it's one of the fastest ways to improve productivity.

2. Turn "things" into "actions"

With the world "speeding up", one issue is the sheer volume of "things" being thrown at us: messages, emails, ideas, paperwork, reports to read, changes happening all over the place. It can get confusing and overwhelming very quickly. A strategy that really helps is to turn any piece of information, whether it's an idea or a worry in your head, an email on your screen, or a piece of paper landing on your desk, into a 'next physical action'. It's easy to get distracted worrying about the bigger picture, or to let things pile up until you feel overloaded and have no idea where to start. In fact, the less clear we are on our priorities, the more satisfying distractions become.

So with each "thing", ask yourself if it's actionable. If there's no action, be ruthless straight away and file it for future reference, delete it or remove it. If it IS actionable, ask yourself what is the next physical action you could take. Physical actions are things like "call" or "email" or "write down on paper" – not vague things like "sort out" or "follow up". This level of clarity in your thinking forces your brain to picture what it looks like getting that thing done. And once you have that firmly in your mind, many would say you're halfway there.

3. Embrace the word "No"

Most people struggle with saying "no". It can feel awkward. But remember a few golden rules: you are saying no to the task, not the person. It might be a good idea, but does it really fit with your strategy? It might add value, but does it add enough value to be worth your time? Are you saying yes because you feel guilty or obligated? Are you saying yes because you got excited and carried away? These are all human traits that can get us into trouble. So learn to say "no!" to things much faster and more frequently. And remember that "No" is a complete sentence.

4. Conduct a weekly review

One of the best ways to reduce cognitive overload is to develop a regular practice of reviewing your work. A weekly review is an hour or so set aside to focus on the strategic, project-level thinking that you need to do. In our experience, one of the biggest deficiencies in organizations is when things get too busy to think. Often people are made to feel guilty for the time they spend thinking and planning. Thinking is de-prioritized, or seen as a "luxury" that can wait. In fact, thinking is the most important work we do, and is the root of all efficiency. The more you think about your work, the easier it becomes.

5. Seek small wins

The psychology of "momentum" is very important for productivity, and can counter-balance a lot of the "stuck" feelings of being overwhelmed and overloaded. Developing momentum is a simple matter of brain chemistry. When our brains experience completion, they release a little hit of dopamine, a reward chemical in our brains that is said to have evolved in us during caveman times so that we would feel satisfied about hunting before we went hungry.

Experiencing meaningful completion, even of small tasks, creates in us the desire for more completion. Dopamine is highly addictive, so in that way, success breeds success. Breaking everything down into small wins is a powerful way to build momentum.

From Technology

1. Turn off notifications

Every notification is a tiny piece of information that has the potential to create a huge interruption. The typical office worker is interrupted or switches tasks every three minutes. And it can take 23 minutes to get back to where you left off[11]. These small interruptions have a cumulative effect in wrecking your attention. Use the settings in your devices to limit yourself to only the most essential notifications.

The mental headspace this creates can be nothing short of life-changing. And if you're scared to do this in case you miss something vital, just give yourself a trial day first rather than committing to it permanently. We don't think you'll go back once you see the benefits.

2. Keep your email inbox at zero

Email can be a huge source of anxiety, fear and guilt. Why? Because hidden deep

in your inbox are all those uncertainties, building up. So develop strategies to get your inbox regularly back to zero. This is best achieved by batch-processing email at particular times of the day, rather than having it turned on in the background all of the time.

Don't confuse email with your to-do list. Email is, at best, a useful communication tool and at worst, the cause of your distraction rather than the solution. For most people, their best work happens when they find ways to get outside the inbox. This means being ruthless in filing away or deleting all the emails that don't have a next physical action and keeping the distraction to a minimum.

It also means using advanced features like setting up rules to automate certain types of email, text-expander or "quick parts" tools to reduce repetition or forwarding the bigger, actionable emails straight to apps so that they can be added to your to-do list.

3. Take advantage of AI and automation in apps

Choosing apps that have a high degree of automation can help reduce the time spent on lower-value tasks. Choose software like Zapier or IFTTT that provide opportunities to synchronize or interface with other apps you use, so that you spend less time moving information between different apps and more time focussing on the stuff that really matters.

These tools can add new contacts to your CRM, auto-reply to new Twitter followers, post content to different social media channels and a whole host of other time saving activities. And while the idea of AI assistants is still some way from being

mainstream, we see a day when everyone will have their own version of Alexa for work - innovative companies like x.ai are already making this possible for diary management at work.

4. Narrow down your app list

There are too many apps promising solutions to our stresses and strains. It can become distracting just keeping track of which apps you're supposed to be using! A lot of productivity improvements actually come from changing our own habits, or better defining the problem we're faced with, but since both of these things are harder to do, many people head for the app store looking for a quicker fix like a new app.

There is also the temptation to keep switching from one good app to a new, supposedly better one, in search of the ultimate app perfection. In many cases, the switching between tools becomes a distraction in itself - there is always a set-up cost in terms of our time and attention.

It's much better to find a few apps that save you time and bring you a productivity benefit, learn them thoroughly, and then stick with them. Being an "early adopter" of the coolest new tool may make you seem cool, but chances are it hasn't been tested properly or had enough users providing feedback, and it ends up not working well. "Productive" and "cool" are not the same thing, sorry. You can find a list of some of the most tried and tested apps at
www.thinkproductive.com/appswelove

5. Collect info in big buckets, not tiny cups

When organizing information in a folder-structure format, whether it's reference folders in your email inbox or a shared drive or servers used to hold the documents that you collaborate on, it can be tempting to create a large number of small folders. The logic seems pretty simple: it feels easier to know where you'll find something in future if it lives in a folder with a very specific name. However, the opposite is true.

A much smaller number of "big buckets", each containing a large number of files is much quicker to search, easier to maintain and also much quicker to file new items into. The mindset of "big buckets, not tiny cups" will become increasingly useful as predictive technologies and AI are able to "join the dots" on these items for you. It makes searching via specific keywords or details much easier and quicker in future, too. Remember the triple overload: 2.5h of searching per day! What a waste.

For Teams

1. The power of the team

There's only so much we can do as individuals. Teams are powerful. In fact, the real work gets done when a team is totally focused on a shared mission. One reason why the triple overload remains a threat to the flexibility, innovation, wellbeing and growth of companies is that people don't understand the value and the dynamics of truly functioning as a team.

2. Set the right expectations

A workplace conducive to productivity is one that takes into account the differences in personal workstyles of team members and sets clear and concise boundaries on issues such as:

+ Expectations or minimum standards in replying to internal emails

+ Service-level expectations for clients/customers

+ Expectations around collaboration or helping colleagues, away from an individual's' core job role

+ Working hours, particularly taking into consideration the etiquette and hard rules around breaks, lunchtimes, and when it is expected or acceptable to stay late in the office versus not.

+ Times of the day or week when meetings should or shouldn't take place

+ Etiquette for sending or replying to emails or any kind of instant messages during evenings or holiday periods.

The fact that most of these topics remain grey areas of subjectivity is a huge waste of energy: each member of the team is left to create their own boundaries or "ground rules" as well as spend time worrying about whether their own expectations or "ground rules" match up with those of their bosses and peers.

In our experience, there is often a mis-match between junior and senior staff, with the more junior employees assuming a higher level of expectation, and suffering a lot of stress in trying to meet what they perceive to be irrational or unrealistic standards.

These can be difficult conversations to have within a team or organisation, and should be handled sensitively. Creating a document such as a "team charter" or "team manifesto" can play the role of making explicit all of these hitherto hidden assumptions and provides clarity.

3. Balance an "open door" policy with a closed door

One management technique that is seeing a resurgence in popularity is the idea

of the "open door policy": a period of time in the day or week when the manager

maintains an "open door" to any employee to discuss any issue. What is useful about

an "open door" (or "surgery time" as it's also referred to) is that it effectively allows

the same manager to set a default that their door may be closed at other times. And

for any non-emergency, it gives the manager the option to refer their employee to

their next "open door" time. If there is an established open door time, closed door

time isn't frustrating.

Similar to the idea of "No-email Fridays", companies can agree on days of the week

when no meetings are permitted. This again frees up time to focus on the delivery of

the work itself. In their book Meeting Together, Lois Graessle and George Gawlinski

introduce the idea of the 40-20-40 model. This illustrates that 40% of your focus for

any meeting should be on the preparation and arrangement, 20% of your attention

on the meeting itself and the final 40% on the follow-through of actions afterwards.

Of course, the most neglected of these three elements is this final one - the follow-

through. With this in mind, a nominated day of the week or even multiple days that

are dedicated exclusively to the follow-through and completion of tasks (rather

than simply more meetings!) can provide respite and recovery time to help team members "catch up" and focus on the "real work".

4. Communication and support

Finally, managers and leaders obviously have a responsibility to focus on the welfare of their employees. This may take many forms such as regular check-ins, more formal appraisals or management supervisions. But in an age where triple overload provides multiple challenges for all of us, it's worth remembering that we are humans being as well as humans working.

Next steps and further reading

We hope you've found this whitepaper valuable. Now it's back to you.
In the age of triple overload, it's genuinely possible to be overloaded yet at the same time not feel overwhelmed. That clarity and productivity happens when you implement some of the ideas and approaches included here.

Books

Cal Newport: Deep Work - Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World
http://calnewport.com/books/deep-work/

Carol Dweck: Mindset - The New Psychology of Success
https://www.mindsetonline.com/

Graham Allcott: How to be a Productivity Ninja
http://www.grahamallcott.com/books

Blogs and Articles

Graham Allcott, Productivity Modes

http://www.grahamallcott.com/my3productivitymodes/

Beat Buhlmann, Get Organized

https://www.siliconrepublic.com/advice/get-organised-work-productivity-evernote

The Power of Small Wins

https://www.discoveryinaction.com.au/latest-news/the-power-of-small-wins/

https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins

To-Do List versus Done List

https://blog.evernote.com/blog/2017/04/12/do-lists-vs-done-lists-jot-down-small-wins-amplify-success/

About the Authors

This paper is part of an ongoing partnership between Evernote, one of the world's leading providers of productivity software, and Think Productive, one of the world's leading providers of productivity workshops and coaching.

Graham Allcott is an entrepreneur, author, speaker and podcaster. He is the founder of Think Productive, one of the world's leading providers of personal productivity training and consultancy, with offices in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands. Graham is the author of three books, including the global best-seller "How to be a Productivity Ninja", and has a regular podcast called "Beyond Busy", which explores the issues of productivity, work/life balance and how people define happiness in their lives, profiling interesting people from Olympic gold medallists to tech entrepreneurs to clowns. Previous roles include Chief Executive of Student Volunteering England, Head of Volunteering at the University of Birmingham and an advisor to the UK Government on youth volunteering policy.

Dr. Beat Bühlmann is General Manager EMEA at Evernote. He started his career at Hewlett Packard in Zurich, followed by Dell in Geneva and Google in London & Zurich. Beat grew up in a country-side, family-run hotel and started his career with a 4-year apprenticeship as car mechanic. He further holds a Swiss engineering degree in computer science, an E-MBA (Zurich), and a Doctorate in Business Administration (Adelaide). Beat holds teaching assignments at IMD Lausanne, Harvard Extension School, Swiss-Board-School, Uni Zurich and Uni St. Gallen, is book author, and board-member of 2 companies.

For more than 15 years, Beat has actively been researching virtual teams in theory and practice and published the management book 'Need to manage a virtual team? Theory and practice in a nutshell' (link). Further, in 2017, Beat published his 2nd book about personal development called 'Become the CEO of Your Own Life' (link), showing a simple but effective way to combine work and private life in a meaningful way.

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