



Working harder, accomplishing less

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If you're sinking fast in the sea of information overload, you're not alone.

While technology is supposed to be helping us work faster and more efficiently, the reality is that we're so swamped with e-mails, phone calls, text messages, interruptions and ill-planned meetings that it's hard to get any work done.

Bruce Friesen is a business owner who understands the importance of taking advantage of technology to help his staff and improve his company's performance.

He has invested heavily in keeping his company, Baywest Property Management Services Ltd., up to date with technology but it hasn't always had the desired effect.

"We have been really pushing hard into technology for the last couple of years and I think with some successes but I don't think we've had the kind of successes we could achieve if we could help people change their work habits," said Friesen. "It's okay to give people new tools and new technology but we found people becoming overwhelmed.

"There is some frustration around technology and people feeling like they're drowning a bit."

They're not alone. Many people in the workforce today think they are scrambling to work harder and accomplishing less. All that overload adds up to billions of dollars of lost productivity and workers feeling stressed and unable to ever get to the end of their to-do lists.

"Some of us are letting the technology we have, as good as it is, make certain demands and take us away from other priorities," said Friesen.

As wonderful as it can be in some ways, technology has also created the monster of the work that never ends.

Jennifer Kobyll, president and chief executive of Mission Control Canada, says modern working days are far removed from the ones that could be managed by dealing with the inbox and the outbox. Mission Control is an international productivity organization that has clients ranging from individuals to corporations like Microsoft and Boeing.

"That seems like ancient mythology now," she said. "We have PDAs, cell phones, post it notes, calendars.



CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun

Jennifer Kobyll is director of training and development for Mission Control Canada, a productivity training company that can help managers and employees deal with time-gobbling bad habits.

"People think there is something wrong with them, they can't keep up they are overwhelmed or stressed."

The first lesson of Mission Control is that you aren't alone and you're not inadequate. First, you have to accept that it can't all be done and secondly our work habits haven't adapted to the advances of technology.

"We're in a different time now," said Kobyll. "It is not possible to get it all done. All our work habits were correlated around getting it all done, but that's impossible.

"Trying to get it all done is impeding people's productivity."

In a typical day, the phone rings and you answer it. Your e-mail pops up, you can't resist reading -- then you may have to stop everything else and fire off an answer. Or it prompts you to head off on another tangent and forget completely your original task and goals. Someone comes by your desk or office, you stop to talk, or answer his or her questions or have a mini meeting. The list of interruptions is endless and often by the end of the day, you're left wondering what you actually accomplished.

"The biggest problem is that people are unprepared for the demands, the speed, the volume and complexity of 21st century work," said Kobyll. "In the last five to 10 years there has been an explosion in technology.

"Five years ago how many people had a Blackberry? Now Telus is giving them away for free. The speed, the volume and the complexity of information have exploded."

For Friesen, one of the biggest revelations was how e-mail was slowing him down, not improving his productivity.

"The biggest culprit is e-mail," he said. "Before Mission Control I really camped on e-mail, it really took me away from doing projects that were going to help my company do better."

Friesen now disciplines himself to check e-mail at set times, a method that works for him but one Kobyll said has to be adapted to the worker and the job. There is no one size fits all; Mission Control teaches people to figure out the best system that works for their work and their life.

It was by chance one of Friesen's staffers heard on the car radio about the Vancouver company Mission Control Canada, a company that works with people to offer practical strategies for coping with the information overload and at the same time becoming more productive and less stressed.

He attended a Mission Control seminar with a couple of his management staff and graduated convinced that everyone in his 54-person company would benefit from the instruction and coaching on coping with information overload. His entire company is slated to take a customized course with Mission Control in April.

For Friesen, it's an investment he expects will pay off.

"It's a big cost but we actually want to change some work processes," he said. "The way our company schedules, the way we communicate with e-mail, we want to address this company-wide, and we want everyone on board."

And it's not just about managing priorities in your working life. How many times do you try to commit to a running schedule, or a gym routine and just never make it out the door? Or how often do you promise your kids you'll drop everything to hang out on the beach with them, only to find 17 pressing issues -- whether it's mowing the lawn or meeting a client -- that push your best intentions aside?

Friesen, a husband and father of four, said he has applied Mission Control's strategies to his personal life, scheduling in such events as a regular workout with his 19-year-old son and a weekly date with his wife.

"My family is a real priority and yet, even though I'd be saying they are a priority, I didn't take the time to schedule priority time into my day for them.

"Since Mission Control, I do that."

For Friesen and others who are adapting the principals they have learned in Mission Control courses, it's a

shift that gives them more power over their schedule and their life, instead of being bounced about by a relentless torrent of information and demands for time.

"It is trying to be more deliberate about one's life," said Friesen.

Debra McFadyen, who works in project management, turned to Mission Control after finding that after 20 years of using a paper-based system to keep organized, it was no longer working effectively for her.

"It was starting to fail me in the chaotic, hectic environment I am working in," she said. "I have a really good grasp and understanding of the principles around priority management and I had developed some really good habits but it was starting to fail me," she said. "I was feeling somewhat out of control and overwhelmed and that was really what drove me to go ahead with the program."

A few weeks after taking the Mission Control program McFadyen said the results are starting to show.

"It has given me almost instantly a feeling that I am more in control of my life and I can left go of things that just aren't important to me right now," she said. "I am more focused, I have more energy and more time to reflect without the guilt."

"I feel improved performance and I feel like I am being more productive."

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TAKING CONTROL

Tips for being productive in from Mission Control

- Trash the to do list: You need a system that sorts, plans and commits you that is determined by something other than the latest urgent matter to pop up. You need a reliable way to keep things in existence beyond the temporary nature of your memory.

- Create accomplishments: Schedule your tasks as though they have already happened with the desired result. Language can be a powerful motivator. Exercise is far less compelling on your calendar than something along the lines of, "worked out, felt fabulous and another step towards my goal of meeting my person best time in the Sun Run."

- Plan for interruptions: Slot in an hour or two a day for interruptions so when things come up that you must deal with, your entire schedule won't be thrown into disarray. Leave room for spontaneous occurrences, whether it's an impromptu meeting or a call from a long lost friend and you'll end up getting more done in the long run.

- Schedule checking your e-mails and messages: You could let your regular communicators know in advance of your new strategy, telling them, for example, "I will be taking on the practice of checking my e-mails between the hours of 10 to 11 a.m. and 3 to 4 p.m. daily and will be returning e-mails during those times." Notification trains people you communicate with what to expect.

Source: Mission Control, www.missioncontrol.com

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