

Overworked Americans or Overwhelmed Americans?

H

ow would you answer the following question?

Which word best describes the typical working American today?

- A) Overworked
- B) Underworked
- C) Energetic
- D) Lazy

While much has been written of late as to whether A, B, C, or D is correct, the most appropriate answer may well be "None of the above." Powerful social forces have the potential to turn each of us into human whirlwinds running in fast forward. Work, time away from work, and everything in between appear as if they are all part of an ever-lengthening to-do list, to be handled during days that race by.

To say that Americans work too many hours, and that too much work is at the root of the time pressure we feel and the leisure we lack, is to miss the convergence of larger, more fundamental issues. We could effectively handle the longer hours (actually less than 79 minutes daily) that we work compared with Europeans. It is everything else competing for our attention that leaves us feeling overwhelmed. Once overwhelmed, the feeling of being overworked quickly follows.

Nearly every aspect of American society has become more complex, even since the mid-1980s. Learning new ways of managing and increasing productivity takes its toll. Merely living in America today guarantees that your day, week, month, year, and life, and your physical,

.....
You Decide
.....

.....
What Merits
.....

.....
Attention
.....

.....
And Action
.....

.....
Jeff Davidson
.....

emotional, and spiritual energy will be depleted without the proper vantage point from which to approach each day.

Do you know anyone who works who consistently has unscheduled, free stretches of time? Five factors, or "megarealities," are simultaneously contributing to the perceptual and actual erosion of leisure time among Americans, including:

- population growth;
- an expanding volume of knowledge;
- mass-media growth and electronic addiction;
- the paper-trail culture; and
- an overabundance of choices.

Population

From the beginning of creation to 1850 A.D., world population grew to one billion. It grew to two billion by 1930, three billion by 1960, four billion by 1979, and five billion by 1987, with six billion en route. Every 33 months, the current population of America, 256 million people, is added to the planet.

The world of your childhood is gone forever. The present is crowded and becoming more so. Each day, world population (births minus deaths) increases by more than 260,000 people. Regardless of your political, religious, or economic views, the fact remains that geometric growth in human population dominates every aspect of the planet and its resources, the environment, and all living things. This is the most compelling aspect of our existence, and will be linked momentarily to the four other megarealities.

When John F. Kennedy was elected president, domestic population was 180 million. It grew by 70 million in one generation. Our growing population has not dispersed over the nation's 5.4 million square miles. About 97 percent of the U.S. population resides on 3 percent of its

Viewed from 2003,

1993 will appear

as a period of

relative calm and

stability when life

moved at a

manageable pace.

land mass. Half of our population resides within 50 miles of the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean, and 75 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas.

More densely packed urban areas have resulted predictably in a gridlock of the nation's transportation systems. It is taking you longer merely to drive a few blocks; it is not your imagination. Our population and road use grow faster than our ability to repair highways, bridges, and arteries. In fact, the number of vehicles (primarily cars) is multiplying twice as fast as people, currently approaching 400 million, compared with 165 million registered motorists.

Some 86 percent of American commuters still get to work by automobile, and 84 percent of inner-city travel is by automobile. The average American now commutes 157,600 miles to work during his or her working life.

Local government planners re-

port there will be no clear solution to gridlock for decades, and all population studies reveal that our nation's metropolitan areas will become home to an even greater percentage of the population. Even lower populated urban areas will face unending traffic dilemmas.

Knowledge

People in America fear that they are underinformed. At this moment, you and everyone you know are being bombarded on all sides. The volume of new knowledge broadcast and published in every field is enormous and exceeds anyone's ability to keep pace. All told, more words are published or broadcast in a day than you could comfortably take in over the rest of your life. By far, America leads the world in the sheer volume of information generated and disseminated.

Even our language keeps expanding. Since 1966, more than 60,000 words have been added to the English language—equal to half or more of the words in some languages. Harvard Library subscribes to some 160,000 journals and periodicals.

Media Growth

The effect of the mass media on our lives is enormous. Worldwide media coverage certainly yields benefits. Democracy springs forth when oppressed people have a chance to see or learn about how people in free societies live. As we spend more hours tuned to electronic media, we are exposed to tens of thousands of messages and images. In America, more than three out of five television households own videocassette recorders, while the number of movie tickets sold and videos rented in the United States each exceeded one billion annually starting in 1988. In 1972, three major television networks dominated television—ABC, NBC, and CBS. There now are 339

full-power, independent television stations, and many cable television subscribers receive up to 140 channels offering more than 72,000 programs per month.

Radio listenership does not lag either. From 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. each weekday in America, listenership far surpasses that of television viewership. Unknown to most people, since television was first introduced, the number of radio stations has increased tenfold, and 97 percent of all households owns an average of five radios, not counting car radios. On weekdays, 95.2 percent of Americans listens to radio for three hours and 14 minutes.

Tune Out

Tomorrow, while dressing, rather than plugging into the mass media, quietly envision how you would like your day to be. Include everything that is important to you. Envision talking with others, making major decisions, having lunch, attending meetings, finishing projects, and walking out in the evening. You will experience a greater sense of control over aspects of your position that you may have considered uncontrollable.

There is only one party who controls the volume and frequency of information to which you are exposed. That person is you. As yet, few people are wise information consumers. Each of us needs to vigilantly guard against being deluged with excess data. The notion of "keeping up" with everything is illusory, frustrating, and self-defeating. The sooner you give it up, the better you will feel and function.

Keen focus on a handful of priorities has never been more important. Yes, some compelling issues must be given short shrift. Otherwise you run the risk of being overwhelmed by more demanding issues, and feeling overwhelmed always exacerbates feeling overworked.

Public Management

Recognize that

from now on,

you will face an

ever-increasing

array of items

competing for

your attention.

Paper Trails

Imagine staring out the window from the fifth floor of a building and seeing a stack of reports from the ground up to your eye level. This 55-foot high stack would weigh some 659 pounds. A 1990 issue of *Pulp & Paper* reports that Americans annually consume 659 pounds of paper per person. In Japan, it is only 400 pounds per person; in Europe, Russia, Africa, Australia, and South America, far less.

Similar to too much information, having to deal with too much paper is going to make you feel overwhelmed and overworked. Americans today are consuming at least three times as much paper as 10 years ago. The prediction of paperless offices has not come to pass.

There are two basic reasons why our society spews so much paper: We have the lowest postal rates in the world, and the broadest distribution

of paper-generating technology. In 1991, Congress received more than 300 million pieces of mail, up from 15 million in 1970. Nationwide, more than 55 million printers are plugged into at least 55 million computers, and annually kick out billions of reams.

Attempting to contain what seems unmanageable, organizations and institutions, public and private, create paper accounting systems. These systems provide temporary relief and some sense of order. Usually they become ingrained and immovable, while creating more muddle. These accounting systems go by names such as federal income taxes, deed of trust, car loan, and more. Sure, accounting is necessary, but why so complicated? Because in the era of overinformation, overinformation is used as a form of protection.

Of the five megarealities, only paper flow promises to diminish some day as virtual reality, the electronic book, and the gigabyte highway are perfected. For the foreseeable future, however, you are likely to be up to your eyeballs in paper. Start where you are—it is essential to clear the in-boxes of your mind and your desk. Regard each piece of paper entering your personal domain as a potential mutineer or rebel. Each sheet has to earn its keep and remain worthy of your retention.

An Overabundance of Choices

In 1969, Alvin Toffler predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many choices. He said that this would inhibit action, result in greater anxiety, and trigger the perception of less freedom and less time. Having choices is a blessing of a free-market economy. Like too much of everything else, however, having too many choices leads to the feeling of being overwhelmed and results not only in increased time expenditure but also in a mounting form of exhaustion.

Consider the supermarket glut: Gorman's (circa 1988) *New Product News* reports that in 1978 the typical supermarket carried 11,767 items. By 1987, that figure had risen to an astounding 24,531 items—more than double in nine years. More than 45,000 other products were introduced during those years, but failed.

It is important to avoid engaging in low-level decisions. If a tennis racket comes with either a black or brown handle, and it is of no concern to you, take the one the clerk hands you. Whenever you catch yourself about to make a low-level decision, ask yourself, Does this really make a difference? Get in the habit of making fewer decisions each day—the ones that count.

A Combined Effect

In a *Time* magazine cover story entitled, "Drowsy America," the director of Stanford University's sleep center concluded, "Most Americans no longer know what it feels like to be fully alert." Lacking a balance between work and play, responsibility and respite, "getting things done" can become an end-all. We function like human doings instead of human beings. We begin to link executing the items on our growing "to do" lists with feelings of self-worth. As the list keeps growing longer, the lingering sense of more to do infiltrates our sense of self-acceptance.

As Americans, we appear poised to accommodate a frenzied, time-pressured existence, as if this were the way it has to be and always has been. This is not how it has to be. As an author, I have a vision. I see Americans leading balanced lives, with rewarding careers, happy home lives, and the ability to enjoy themselves. Our ticket to living and working at a comfortable pace is not accommodating a way of being that does not support us, but addressing the true nature of the problem head-on.

The combined effect of the five

megarealities will continue to accelerate the feeling of pressure. Meanwhile, there will continue to be well intentioned but misdirected voices who choose to condemn "employers" or "Washington, D.C." or what have you for the lack of true leisure in our lives.

A Complete Self

We are forging our own frenetic society. The good news is that the key to forging a more palatable existence can occur step by step. You, for example, are whole and complete right now, and you can achieve balance in your life. You are not your position. You are not your tasks; they do not define you and they do not constrain you. You have the capacity to acknowledge that your life is finite; you can not indiscriminately take in the daily deluge that our culture heaps on each of us and expect to feel anything but overwhelmed.

Viewed from 2003, 1993 will appear as a period of relative calm and stability when life moved at a manageable pace. When your days on earth are over and the big auditor in the sky examines the ledger of your life, she will be upset if you did not take enough breaks and enjoy yourself.

On a deeply felt personal level, recognize that from now on, you will face an ever-increasing array of items competing for your attention. Each of the five megarealities will proliferate in the '90s. You can not handle everything, nor is making the attempt desirable. It is time to make compassionate though difficult choices about what is best ignored, versus what merits your attention and action. **END**

Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is the author of Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society.

Copyright 1993. All rights reserved. This article, or parts herein, may not be reproduced in any form without written permission of the author.