



Surviving In A Sped-Up World

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WHEN VIEWED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of 2005, 1995 will appear to have been a year of relative calm and stability, a time when life moved at a manageable pace. Does this astound you? Are you already swamped by challenges you face today – never mind ten years from now?

Unquestionably, the pace of modern society has sped up. Skyscrapers are erected in months. Books can be written and published in weeks. Major surgery and recovery can be done in days. Prescription glasses are ready in an hour. Fax machines transmit pages in seconds.

Conversely, traveling is becoming more cumbersome. Learning new ways of managing and new ways of increasing productivity are taking a toll, while juggling professional and family responsibilities is a growing challenge. Among career professionals, do you know anyone today who consistently has unscheduled, free stretches?

Powerful social forces have the potential to indiscriminately turn each of you into a human whirlwind charging about in “fast forward,” and the pressures you face are enormous. But everyone in industrialized nations, on your staff or who holds a managerial post feels the same way. We seem to be headed irrevocably toward a new epoch in human existence. But is frantic any way to exist as a species? Is it any way to run a life?

All people may one day live in democratic societies. Will they be free, however, to address the problems confronting the planet and our development as human beings? Can we tackle these higher agenda if legions of the world's educated continue daily to rake through the morass of too much information and too many items competing for attention?

John Kenneth Galbraith studied poverty-stricken societies on four continents. In *The Nature of Mass Poverty* he concluded that some societies remain poor (often for centuries) because they *accommodate* poverty. Although it's difficult to live in abject poverty, Galbraith found that many poor societies are not

willing to accept the hardships involved in making things better.

For our part, the Earth's industrialized societies appear poised to accommodate a frenzied, time-pressured existence, as if this is 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 our world made up of people leading balanced lives, with rewarding careers, happy homes and the ability to enjoy themselves. And the ticket to living and working at a comfortable pace is by not accommodating a way of being that doesn't support us or the planet.

As leaders, we must set the example.

While the pace of life has radically changed, even since the mid-'80s, the approach that many people take to solve tense predicaments is to employ time management techniques. There is no value, however, in becoming more adept at dealing with the world the way it used to be.

The Mega-Realities

Rather, to gain breathing space requires an accurate portrait of our existence. In fact, five factors, mega-realities, are simultaneously contributing to the perceptual and actual erosion of personal time: population growth, an expanding volume of knowledge, mass media growth and electronic addition, a paper trail culture and an over-abundance of choices.

■ **Population** – From the beginning of creation to A.D. 1850, the 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 16 months, in fact, the current population of Japan, 123,000,000 people, is added to the planet. Clearly, the world of your childhood, and of a few years ago, is gone forever. The present is crowded, and becoming more so. Each day, the world's human population increases by 265,000. Regardless of one's political, religious or economic views, the fact remains that geometric growth in human population

permeates and dominates every aspect of the planet and its resources, the environment and all living things. It is the most compelling aspect of our existence.

■ **Knowledge** – Everybody, especially world leaders, fears that he is under-informed, yet we are all being bombarded on all sides by information. But “over-information” can wreak havoc on the receptive capacities of the unwary. Today, the volume of new knowledge broadcast and published in every field is enormous and exceeds anyone's ability to keep pace. Worldwide, more than 365,000 books are published each year – all told, more words are published or broadcast in a day than you could comfortably ingest in the rest of your life. Increasingly, there is no body of knowledge that anyone can be expected to know.

Too, the more information you try to ingest, the faster the clock seems to race. Granted, no individual is exposed to the massive volume of data generated, but the spillover effects are phenomenal and unabating. Too much information violates our senses and can be harmful.

There is only one party who controls the volume and frequency of information that you're exposed to. That person is you. But, as yet, few are wise information consumers. In fact, each of us needs to vigilantly guard against being deluded 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 function.

A keen focus on a handful of priorities has never been more important. And, yes, some compelling issues must be given short shrift. Otherwise, you run the risk of being buried by more demanding issues.

■ **Media Growth** – As with population growth and the explosion of information, the effect of the mass media on our lives continues unchecked. Worldwide media coverage certainly yields benefits. For democracy springs forth when the oppressed have a chance to see or learn about how those in free societies live.

"More information is produced on earth every 24 hours than you could ingest in the rest of your life."

"Whenever you catch yourself about to make a low level decision, consider: does this really make a difference?"

As we spend more hours tuned to electronic media, we are exposed to tens of thousands of messages and images. To capture overstimulated, distracted viewers, television and other news media increasingly rely on sensationalism. Like too much food at once, too much data isn't easily ingested. You can't afford to pay homage to everyone else's 15 minutes of fame.

As regards the affairs of men, there may or may not be some larger order. If there is, are we likely to grasp it by ingesting the mass media barrage? Albert Einstein toiled toward the end of his career to derive a unified theory of the universe, but did not. Likewise, in *Powershift*, Alvin Toffler attempted to establish a model to predict social development, but did not. All the while, with its sensationalized trivia, the mass media overglut can obscure the fundamental issues that do merit concern, such as that of preserving the environment.

Tomorrow, while dressing, rather than plugging in to the mass media, quietly envision how you would like your day to be. Include everything that's important to you. Envision talking with others, making major decisions, having lunch, attending meetings, finishing projects and walking out in the evening. If you do this exercise, I think you'll feel a greater sense of control over aspects of your position that previously you may have considered uncontrollable.

■ *Paper Trails* – Paper, paper, everywhere, but not a thought to think. Is controlling the paper flow in your organization a burning issue right now? Most of us are consuming three times as much paper as we did 10 years ago. Discarded direct mail, catalogs and solicitations are glutting the world's landfills. To contain what seems unmanageable, institutions create paper accounting systems, which provide temporary relief and some sense of order, while usually becoming ingrained and immovable and creating even more muddle.

Certainly, accounting is necessary,

"There is no keeping up: there are only choices to make about where to devote your time and attention."

but need it be so complicated? Because in the over-information era reams of data are regarded as a form of protection. Paperless office, where are you? It is now essential to clear the in-bins of your mind and your desk. It is time to 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 retention.

■ *Too Many Choices* – Toffler predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many choices. He predicted 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 is harmful to breathing space and can result not only in increased time expenditure but also in mounting exhaustion.

Periodically, in fact, the sweetest choice can be choosing from what you already have – choosing to have what you've already chosen. More important is to avoid engaging in low-level decision-making. If a tennis racquet comes with either a black, brown or green handle and it doesn't matter to you which you own, take the one the clerk hands you.

In fact, whenever you catch yourself about to make a low-level decision, consider: does this really make a difference? Get in the habit of making less decisions each day – make only the ones that count.

Combined Effect

The combined effect of the five mega-realities accelerates the feeling of pressure, although the symptoms are not always acknowledged as such. One example is engaging in activities simultaneously, such as reading while eating. Other symptoms abound, however. Do you attempt to think while there are distractions? Are longstanding hobbies no longer of interest? Do friends merit only occasional phone calls? Do you "need" to wind down before bed?

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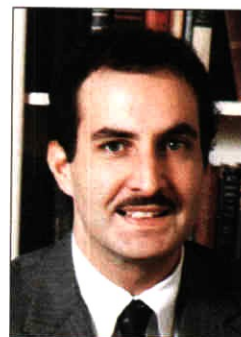
If you're too busy to enjoy your life, you're too busy. If you're too busy to stay calm, you're too busy. If you're too busy to say in shape, you're too busy. If you're too busy to truly lead, you're too busy.

If you lack a balance between work and play, responsibility and respite, "getting things done" can become an end-all. You function like a human doing instead of a human being. You begin to link executing the items on your growing "to do" list with feelings of self-worth. As the list keeps growing, the lingering sense of more to do infiltrates your sense of self-acceptance.

You are whole and complete right now. You are not your position. You are not your tasks – they neither define you nor constrain you. Your life is finite – you cannot take in the daily deluge and expect to achieve balance. 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 *didn't* take enough breaks and upset if you *didn't* 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 mega-realities will proliferate in the '90s. You are a role model for others; you cannot handle everything, nor is making the attempt desirable.

It is time to make compassionate though difficult choices about what is best ignored, versus what does merit your attention and action.



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