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"It's a life of choices. And the problem is there are too many of them. If we are not careful, what we do may not reflect our true values. We must make sure that we don't lose sight of what's really important."

-- Harold Taylor of Harold Taylor Time Consultants, Ltd.
www.taylorintime.com

Reconfiguring What Looks Like an Undoable Job

You're surrounded. Unanswered e-mails beckon on your computer screen, your to-do list has crept onto its third page, and your desk has exploded with paper. Everything's urgent and important, and you're busy all day long. Technology has changed these jobs into something much bigger than anyone ever expected. Truth is that you can work 24-hours a day, seven days a week for a year or even two and still not finish everything you want to do. Welcome to the land of the overworked.

The overworked tend to have higher stress levels, more symptoms of clinical depression, report poorer health, and are more likely to neglect caring for themselves, according to *Overwork in America: When the Way We Work Becomes Too Much*, an executive summary created by the [Families and Work Institute](#).

In an earlier study, the institute found that one in three Americans workers "experienced feeling overworked as a chronic condition." The 2004 study showed 44 percent of employees reported being chronically overworked often or very often. Chronically overworked employees are more likely to make mistakes, to feel angry at their employers and to resent co-workers.

Chronic overwork is a spin-off of how we work today. The major issues are excessive multi-tasking and interruptions, increase in job pressure, performing "low-value work," having 24/7 accessibility outside normal work hours, and working on vacation, according to the study.

The Institute found many employees who complain of doing low-value work -- those tasks that many consider a "waste of time." Low-value tasks, such as "planning a meeting to plan a meeting to plan a meeting," take up valuable time away from more important tasks and projects. Spending your day doing the little things do give you a sense of accomplishment and can fill the hours at work, but it's a great way to hide from working on those thorny, time-consuming projects.

Traditional work hours are blurred with cell phones, beepers, email, computers and flexible work schedules. According to the study, 55 percent of chronically overworked employees work on vacation. "Although working during vacation may make some contribution to being overworked on the job, it seems likely that those who are more overworked on the job feel a greater need, or are under greater pressure, to continue to work during their holidays," the study reports.

Some demographic groups reported being more overworked than others. Baby Boomers, parents of teenagers and those caring for elderly parents all reported feeling more overworked than other groups. Men tend to work longer hours, but women whose jobs require more multi-tasking are more likely to report feeling overworked, the study says. However, the gender differences disappear if a man and a woman have jobs with similar multi-tasking.

But we pay a price for overwork. Chronic stress leads to a variety of health-related issues, and the Center for Disease and Prevention estimates that 80 percent of illnesses are stress-related. Eleven of the top 20 prescription

drugs in the U.S. are used to treat depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, insomnia, and high cholesterol, according to www.rxlist.com. Prescriptions for pain and high blood sugar round out the top 20 list. (To view the Top 200 Prescriptions for 2005, click [here](#).) For The University of Texas System, the Top 10 prescription drugs for the 2006 fiscal year included acid reflux, cholesterol, insomnia, and depression prescriptions.

There are some things you can do to ease the burden.

At the end of each day, write a list of what you've accomplished. So many times, we focus on all the things we haven't done that we lose sight of what we have accomplished.

Take a vacation. A real vacation. Please. Don't come into the office, check your work e-mail, or phone in. The people around you would really appreciate it too.

Celebrate your successes. Go do something you love to do.

Give yourself a break. We all have things we think we should do -- the couldas, shouldas, wouldas that dig into you and don't let go. The better questions are: What do I need to do? What can I do? What can I take off my plate? What's the worst that can happen if I don't do this?

Delegate when you can, even at home. Hate wrapping gifts? Buy gift bags or hire a teen-ager to do it for you. For everything you can't stand to do, there's someone out there who absolutely loves it. For a lunch at McDonald's and \$20 each, I hired a friend's two daughters who labeled, stuffed, and stamped all of my holiday newsletters.

A Mayo Clinic [article](#) recommends taking the time to nurture yourself by working out, listening to music or taking a walk. One way to nurture yourself is planning one night of recreation each week with your family or friends.

Get some sleep. The sleep-deprived make more mistakes, and those mistakes can cost you valuable time to fix.

Create and nurture your support system. Friends and family create a safety zone, and it's great to have someone in your corner when you're stressed or facing any sort of crisis or hardship.

When things are too difficult to manage, seek out a therapist or your doctor to talk to help ease your worries and stress. MD Anderson has an Employee Assistance Program and a Faculty Assistance Program, both of which provide recommendations for counselors. Many other companies also offer similar services.

And remember the old adage. On your deathbed, you're not likely to wish you had spent more time at the office.

From the Bookshelf

How to Get Organized Without Resorting to Arson by Liz Franklin. Identifying herself as a C.A. or "cubicle anthropologist," Franklin's book was recommended by Dr. Edward Hallowell in his book on ADD *Driven to Distraction*. Franklin advocates "good enough organizing," meaning that you don't need to aim for perfection.

Good enough will do. She offers up great tips, including:

Using funny but memorable names for files. An example of a file name she uses for reading that can wait was named "If I Don't Read This No One Will Die."

Use "verbing." When you pick up a piece of paper, decide what action you need to take, and write down the verb on the paper or on a sticky to remind you what to do with it. For example, you see your completed tax return. The next step would be to mail it, and so your "verb" would be "mail."

Most of us don't have memory problems, Franklin said. "You may be trying to fit twenty pounds of To-Dos into a ten-pound brain." Dump your memory on paper and free up brain space.

Got Clutter? I have developed 15 minute, 30 minute and 45 minute presentations on organizing, time management, and productivity. Moving to a new building? I also have a 15-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department. I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution to your organizing problems. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call 713-792-8061 or email jsimon@mdanderson.org. **For past newsletters, click [here](#).**

Happy Organizing!

LINKS:

Families and Work Institute: <http://www.familiesandwork.org/>

Top 200 Prescriptions: <http://www.rxlist.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=79509>

Mayo Clinic Article: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/work-life-balance/WL00056>