

Information overload

If you type the words 'information overload' into Google, you will immediately get an information overload – more than 7 million hits in 0.05 seconds. Some of this information is interesting – for example, you learn that the phrase 'information overload' was first used in 1970, actually before the internet was invented. But much of the information is not relevant or useful: obscure companies and even more obscure bloggers.

Information overload is one of the biggest irritations in modern life. There are news and sports websites to watch, emails that need to be answered, people who want to chat to you online, and back in the real world, friends, family, and colleagues who also have things to tell you. At work, information overload is also causing problems. A recent survey has shown that many company managers believe that it has made their jobs less satisfying, and has even affected their personal relationships outside work. Some of them also think that it is bad for their health.

Clearly there is a problem. It is not only the increase in the quantity of information, it is also the fact that it is everywhere, not just in the home and in the workplace. Many people today do not go anywhere without their smartphones. There is no escape from the internet.

Scientists have highlighted three big worries. Firstly, information overload can make people feel anxious: there is too much to do and not enough time to do it. People end up multitasking, which can make them even more stressed. Secondly, information overload can make people less creative. Research shows that people are more likely to be creative if they are allowed to focus on one thing for some time, without interruptions. Thirdly, information overload can make people less productive. People who multitask take much longer and make many more mistakes than people who do the same tasks one after another.

What can be done about information overload? One solution is technological: there is now a computer program or app you can install called 'Freedom', which disconnects you from the web at preset times. The second solution involves willpower. Switch off your mobile phone and the internet from time to time. The manager of an IT company puts 'thinking time' into his schedule, when all his electronic devices are switched off so that he isn't disturbed. This might sound like common sense. But nowadays, although we have more information than ever before, we do not always have enough common sense.