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Time To Think

By Randy Hain, Managing Partner of Bell Oaks

As busy professionals with compounding responsibilities, isn't it becoming more and more difficult to find time just to ... think? Commiserating with colleagues and friends, we share how our work days are filled with an almost obsessed focus on getting as much work done as possible, countless meetings and squeezing every bit of air out of our schedules. In our other (and most important) roles as fathers/mothers and husbands/wives, we're faced with another harried stretch of time each evening filled with family dinner, kid's activities and the myriad other things that families require. Weekends are more of the same.

Clever vernacular such as "perpetual hurry syndrome" and "time poverty," are beginning to circulate when describing this phenomenon, but I simply choose to call it *alarming*. We make decisions all day long, but how much of it is reactive and responding to what others throw your way? Taking time to think strategically, be creative or even pause to ponder an issue before responding is a growing challenge. The fact that many of us view time to think as a luxury is a sad indictment of the culture in which we live.

We are addicted to background "noise" and connecting with others through computer and PDA screens. I'm not opposed to technology, but recognize how I've allowed it to exacerbate my challenge with finding quiet time to think. What used to be a leisurely drive to work a decade ago is now crammed with phone calls. Waiting for appointments to arrive, stops at red lights and elevator rides are now opportunities to respond with my "Crackberry" to the barrage of emails I receive daily. In an effort to become more efficient, I am sacrificing thinking time.

Research for this article uncovered these insights into our penchant for technology and predisposition for interruption:

- Last year, AOL's third annual "Email Addiction" survey revealed that email use on portable devices has nearly doubled since 2004. Findings from the company's release include: The average email user checks mail about five times a day, and 59 percent of those with portable devices are using them to check email every time a new message arrives. Forty-three percent of email users with portable devices say they keep the device nearby when they are sleeping to listen for incoming mail.

With or without portable devices, 15 percent of Americans describe themselves as "addicted to email," and many are even planning their vacations with email access in mind. About four in 10 email users say it is "very" or "somewhat" important to them to think about email accessibility when they are planning a vacation, and 83 percent admit to checking mail once a day while on vacation.

- The *Wall Street Journal's* Sue Shellenberger writes in her article, "Multitasking Makes You Stupid, Studies Say." A growing body of scientific research shows one of professionals' favorite time-saving techniques—multitasking, can actually make you less efficient and, well, more stupid. Trying to do two or three things at once or in quick succession can take longer overall than doing them one at a time, and may leave you with reduced brainpower to perform each task.
- A study by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce published in the *Harvard Business Review* states: Forty-five percent of high-earning managers are too tired to converse with their spouse or partner after a long day at the office. This strain is wreaking havoc on family and personal lives.

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- From a *TIME* magazine article titled, “Help! I’ve Lost My Focus:” In a study of 1,000 office workers from top managers on down, Basex, an information-technology research firm, found that interruptions now consume an average of 2.1 hours a day, or 28 percent of the workday. The two hours of lost productivity included not only unimportant interruptions and distractions but also the recovery time associated with getting back on task. Estimating an average salary of \$21 an hour for “knowledge workers,” Basex calculated that workplace interruptions cost the U.S. economy \$588 billion a year.
- “Crackberry” was named the 2006 Webster’s New World Collegiate Dictionary New Word of the Year.

Baroness Susan Greenfeld, well-known British author and Professor of Pharmacology at the University of Oxford, said in a *World Business* article titled, “How Technology is Changing the Manager’s Brain:” “*We’re already seeing the impact of the IT revolution on the workplace. Working on the screen is having a massive impact on the way we think and process information. The screen culture is not conducive to taking time to think—everything is instantly available. The result is iconic thinking, quick fixes and short attention spans.*”

Have we relinquished much of our ability to think strategically and creatively to the onslaught of increasingly sophisticated technology? Has the technological age, which was supposed to herald a time of increased leisure, in fact enslaved us? We are almost always reacting to television, the Internet, e-mails and phone calls. This forced diet of (other people’s) information may be a necessary evil, but consider the real possibility that we have swung so far in that direction, we aren’t generating and sharing enough of our own original thought. In her book, Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World, author Dr. Margaret Wheatley writes, “*The single most revolutionary act you can do these days is to find time to think.*”

Time to think, time to pray, time with family, time with friends—these are the components of the fuller and richer lives we all want to lead. Work will always demand as much of our time as we allow. But is technology the real culprit? Probably not. We have the freedom to choose how we spend our time and should take this responsibility onto ourselves. Remember that technology was intended to serve us, and not the other way around.

So how do we create these respites of time we so desperately need? It’s the little things; the small steps that will help us find our “thinking time.” I’ve shared some ideas here:

- ***Start your day on a different note***
Don’t run to your computer and turn it on! Rather than checking email or reading the overnight news the moment you wake up, designate the first 20 minutes for reflection, reading, journaling or prayer. Have a cup of coffee, sit down and think about your day. Or perhaps reading or exercise stimulates your brain. Whatever it is, make it *your* time—it’s the one part of the day when clients aren’t calling and nobody is making demands on your schedule.
- ***Put it on your calendar***
You know the saying that if it isn’t scheduled, it will never happen? Try blocking out small windows of time each day for reflection. I borrowed an idea from the Jesuits called the Daily Examen where I schedule five-minute blocks of time throughout the day to reflect on my actions and think about the future. Schedule these time blocks around travel, meal and bed times. Keith Conley, an EVP with Document Technologies in Atlanta, offers this insight: “*In an effort to force myself to sit back and spend time on the big picture, I have found what works best for me is to schedule 90 minute blocks of open time on my calendar twice a week. This creates an opportunity to focus on business strategy, evaluate progress towards business goals and to do a reality check on how I’m spending my time.*”

- ***Introduce simplicity into your life***
Try reading a book versus listening to the audio version. Spend time with good friends who will challenge you. Listen to beautiful music or watch a classic movie. Take a long walk with your spouse. Do something outside with your kids every day. Embrace their natural curiosity and be grateful they want to learn new things. Make an effort to teach them something about the world and how to think for themselves. Get some time for yourself on the weekend and make sure your spouse does as well.
- ***Don't feed your compulsions***
As a practical measure, turn off the 'ding' when new email arrives. It can wait! Don't feel compelled to answer immediately. Do the same on your PDA. Turning off the audio or LED notification and checking for emails at the appropriate time can add to your ability to concentrate in a conversation or other thinking assignments. Look at other areas that feed tendencies which negatively affect thinking time and make some simple changes.
- ***Hold mini-retreats every quarter***
Take a day off once a quarter, if not more frequently. Use this time only to relax and plan. Explain to your loved ones that you need this to collect yourself and get re-energized. The toughest challenge with a mini-retreat is to turn off your PDA and cell phone. Computers are okay if you are trying to capture your thoughts, but don't plan on checking email.
- ***Schedule/participate in more open discussions and strategy sessions***
It can be as formal as inviting your team to a meeting where you throw a problem on the white board for discussion, or as casual as inviting a few friends to lunch to debate politics. When in the presence of your team, colleagues or friends ask thought-provoking questions. In an effort to break free from simply sharing regurgitated ideas and information, ask "Why" more often. Regardless of how you do it, this open debate and discussion is healthy and will feed and stimulate you in important ways. And by the way ... turn off the PDAs! *"In meetings where everyone is checking email, opportunities for collective creative energy and critical thinking are lost,"* says Nathan Zeldes, a senior engineer at Intel and a leader of the nonprofit, Information Overload Research Group.
- ***Designate certain windows of time as "gadget free"***
Choose times in the day (car rides are ideal) when all electronics are turned off, even the radio. This will take discipline, but imagine the car as your safe haven and "thought incubator." Lori Swope, an Account Manager with Watson Wyatt in Atlanta, has a balance in her life that I admire. She says, *"I set aside certain times of the day for thinking and focusing on the people I love the most. Early morning is reserved for prayer, reading and exercise. The morning ride to school with my daughter is our time together - no Blackberries or phone calls. Dinner with my family means no interruptions or other distractions. It takes discipline, but these are my priorities. And my work is always finished!"*
- ***Surround yourself with personal advisors***
Pat McNulty, former SVP of Allied Waste and president of Barton Protective Services, has found that a "personal" Board of Advisors—consisting of friends, family, colleagues and clergy can stimulate you to think, calibrate, verify and validate; provide a valuable sounding board for decision-making; ask the tough questions; and provide real inspiration. Periodic and informal "values check sessions," give us much-needed pause. He continues: *"Learning to drive, we are taught to look in the mirrors and gauge the short distance immediately in front of the car. We're also instructed to regularly take in the long-range, 'big picture' view. In everyday living, how often do we pause, breathe and take in the wider, more meaningful view?"*

A good friend recently gave me a beautiful leather writing journal. This thoughtful gift has prompted much of the thinking for this article and initiated a significant change in my daily routine. I enjoy writing and used to email myself ideas or leave myself messages at work—adding to the volumes I already receive. Now, I take the journal with me everywhere and find I'm reaching for it instead of my technology enablers. Actually writing by hand provides me a few precious moments between appointments or in the early hours of the day to gather my thoughts on a number of topics, and the process has been rejuvenating.

Dan King, Chief Administrative Officer for Allconnect in Atlanta, offers this advice for creating thinking time: *"I've discovered that three things are needed for me to think creatively – a topic, time and place. During the course of my workweek, I keep a pad to jot down topics that require deeper thinking, business-related or personal. A couple of these topics go with me to my 'think space,' which happens to be a quiet café near my home, once or twice a week. This practice has made me a more valued contributor at work and what I hope is a better husband and dad."*

As many of us 40-somethings have a tendency to do, I am taking stock of what's important and am determined to find the time I need for God, family, work and me. Dr. Ron Young, CEO of TROVE, a national leadership development and coaching firm, recently provided me with this insight: *"There are many different types of thinking. In today's competitive, adrenaline-addicted world, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that we do not have time to think. Living on autopilot or "living on fast forward" is the quickest way to rushing into inefficiency, errors and hollow living. Research tells us that we can save between four and eight hours for every hour we invest in planning."*

He continues: *"We need to make time for big-picture thinking to look beyond ourselves and gain eternal perspective. Without time to think we are unlikely to question popular thinking, to be creative or strategic. Getting outside of ourselves and the rush of our day-to-day lives allows us to reflect, think unselfishly and remember why we are here. Making time to think allow us to connect with deeper needs of meaning and belonging. It allows us to recall that we are human beings, not task-driven robots."*

In conclusion, we give the important areas of our lives our best effort when we're calm, rested and thoughtful. We own the responsibility to make the necessary changes to give ourselves what we need. Author Dr. Margaret Wheatley also said, *"Don't expect anybody to give you the time to think. You will have to claim it for yourself. If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that."* What part of your schedule will you reclaim today to get some thinking time? You read this article and I hope it made you think—that is a good start!

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