

DIGGING
OUT OF THE
DIGITAL

Office

BY ANYA MARTIN

Monday morning. You come to work early today to make a crucial project deadline that has been haunting your brain all weekend and kept you up until midnight Sunday prepping a PowerPoint presentation on your home PC. Your message light is blinking furiously, and 10 messages are already waiting in your voice mail. You log onto your computer and find 80 new e-mails in your in-box, 20 flagged urgent. Your boss instant-messages you that she wants to meet you in her office. Then there goes the cell phone.

Technology has made our lives easier in so many ways. But if this sounds like a typical workday for you, you're not alone. More and more administrative professionals are feeling embattled by a productivity challenge. Technology has freed admins from some (but not all) clerical tasks and streamlined others, creating exciting opportunities for more management responsibility. But it's also meant heightened expectations from bosses and supervisors.

How do you find the time to think out creative solutions when you have to be on the computer looking busy all the time? Or when you're so exhausted from juggling e-mail, instant messages, voice mail, and every other interruption in your day? Sometimes our most creative thinking comes from staring at the wall.

Strategic Thinking Dilemma

Staring at the wall is absolutely essential, says Danielle Graham, administrative assistant to the vice president of financial planning for SISIP Financial Services, a division of the Canadian [Armed] Forces Personnel Support Agency, in Ottawa, Canada. Graham regularly works 11-hour days but is enthusiastic about all the challenging opportunities technology has created for her and sees them as part of her professional growth process. Still, she puts her phone on voice mail and lets the computer rest.

"My executive does come out of his office and find me staring at the wall, but he has acknowledged that it is one of the things he likes about me—that ability to take the time to think, even when the world swirls around us in a hectic frenzy," Graham says.

To Graham, this precious time allows her not only to consider specific issues but also how to streamline policies and procedures, as well as to develop new ideas. For example, one brainstorming session led Graham to suggest to her executive that all of the division's admins be brought to Ottawa for a mega-training session.

"Often left alone in their offices while

other employees went for training and development, admins lacked the ability to network effectively and to feel that they were a unique team that contributed significantly to the company mission and goals," she says.

Her boss thought it was a great idea, the all-admin meeting session has been scheduled for this November, and her fellow admins have expressed excitement, Graham adds.


"A little thought before giving an answer or making a decision can make a difference in how your executive sees your ability to manage people and resources," she says. "Your executive needs to know that these types of issues will be handled with both tact and efficiency, which leaves [him or her] worry-free to accomplish the more important aspects of running a business."

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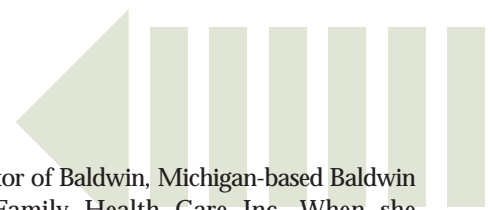
— Barbara Robinson CPS



Technology, however, does not just limit time to think. It also affects how we think, suggests Barbara Robinson CPS, executive assistant to the executive direc-



Conquering the productivity challenges
of the 21st century
while maintaining your sanity



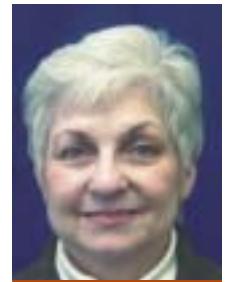
tor of Baldwin, Michigan-based Baldwin Family Health Care Inc. When she started working as an admin 35 years ago, she categorized herself as a “linear” thinker, tackling each project in clear steps from start to completion. As her responsibilities have increased and the economy has stripped away other support staff, Robinson has been forced to multitask, as well as to think “globally,” concentrating not only on her own contribution to a project but its relationship to the “big picture” for her organization.

“The administrative professional of today needs to be able to grow and

Another big issue facing anyone feeling stressed by technological advances, is “change recognition.”

– Mary F. Schmieder CPS

change with the work environment, know how to handle stress, and be able to both delegate and refuse when expectations are unrealistic,” Robinson says.



“The type of person in these positions today cannot be a linear thinker, but must be able to coordinate more than one project at a time and to not allow unfulfilled plans for the day or week to get you down.”

Computers help with the pursuit of the broad picture by letting the admin easily create, save, close, and reopen documents, as well as access a wide variety of information quickly via the Internet, she adds. However, the quantity of information available via Web surfing can also work against the admin by obscuring “the ‘line,’ the ‘thread,’ the pattern that brings ‘all relevant parts together at the end,’” says Robinson.

“Another hindrance to technological advances would be the dependence we place on these systems, and when they are not functioning properly, we find

ourselves with wasted time or a need to recreate previous work," she adds.

Her best "knowledge work" often occurs out of the office while driving to and from the office or doing other personal things. She carries a portable tape recorder and dictates ideas so that she will remember them once she's back at work.

Another big issue facing not just admins, but anyone feeling stressed by technological advances, is "change recognition," says Mary F. Schmieder CPS, executive assistant for the Village of Algonquin, Illinois. This process involves not just the acknowledgement that technology might offer a better way of doing a task than the way it's been done for years, but also exorcising our own fear of change.

Until recently, the town's liquor license renewal process was a slow and grueling process requiring certificates be rolled into a typewriter and establishment-specific information typed anew every year. Now using Microsoft Word's template and mail-merge capacities, all Schmieder has to do is to change the expiration date and the certificates print automatically in less than an hour. In her point of view, not all the best thinking is done by passively staring at the wall.

"*Flowing at a slower pace* is a thinking process that takes a good look at the

Simple Solutions

In order to think, we need to clear space by reducing time wasted in routine tasks. But in the tech crunch today, many admins let technology set their priorities, says Rhonda Finnis CSP (Certified Speaking Professional), president of Ottawa-based On the Right Track Training and Consulting, who teaches public speaking and time management.

Finnis advises her students to turn off the bell in their e-mail programs, check e-

change at once unnerves you as much as putting up with overload, Finnis advises going slowly—perhaps tackling one thing a week.

"This week I'm going to stop printing everything. Next week, I'll try checking e-mail twice a day or once an hour," she says.

Checking less often means not letting your e-mail dominate you, but it doesn't stop the flow. As inside sales coordinator for Rolling Meadows, Illinois-based Kohler Co., Angela Oetjens CPS supports

Melanie Gadener says exacerbating the productivity challenge felt by admins today is a huge gap between how their bosses perceive their jobs and the reality of what they do.



mail only at scheduled times, and get back to old-fashioned prioritizing methods. Then make a rule not to check e-mail or voice messages at home before going to bed or on the way to work.

"You end up responding to the loudest voice, to the crisis of the moment," she adds. "I tell people to write a 'to do' list [before you leave work]. When you come in the morning, compare that to all the things that have happened."

two high-level directors for the national kitchen and bath fixture manufacturing firm and is copied on 99 percent of their e-mails. Oetjens offers the following suggestions for sorting through it all:

- Delete all junk mail, including chain letters from well-meaning friends, without opening them.
- Address first e-mails that require immediate attention; then delete, if possible.
- Flag e-mail that can be handled later, so you remember to return to it.
- Create folders for meetings you are coordinating or other specific projects, and file all related e-mail there, rather than mixed in with all your read mail.
- Title outgoing e-mails referring to a specific project consistently, so they can be easily organized and sorted, i.e. "ABC Meeting July 6—Date Revision."
- Review the e-mail folders you've created at least every six months to see if they've served their purpose and can be either deleted or saved to a back-up CD.

In order to reduce paperwork and find important info faster, Oetjens creates folders and sub-folders on her computer to organize all her tasks, whether events, meetings, customers, correspondence, and other subjects. She adds date taglines to differentiate presentations and events for each customer, as well as on correspondence files.

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procedure to make it simpler, but it should be done while you are moving through the procedure at your normal fast pace, while the phone is ringing, the e-mails are coming, and the boss is handing you another project," Schmieder says. "The most important thing that an admin must remember is that the ability to change procedures to make things simpler and get things done is in her control."

Another way to increase efficiency is to file everything you can electronically rather than in manila folders, so you don't have to waste time and space with old-fashioned filing, Finnis says. Having a desk messy with paperwork not only can delay you finding something but make you feel psychologically overwhelmed.

Old habits, however, can be hard to let go, she acknowledges. If too much



Negotiating Time to Think

But what if your boss equates staring at the wall with daydreaming? Exacerbating the productivity challenge felt by admins today is a huge gap between how their bosses perceive their jobs and the reality of what they do, says Melanie Gadener, a performance improvement consultant and owner of Productivity

Plus Processes in Fremont, California. Gadener advises corporations, primarily in high-tech Silicon Valley, on increasing productivity and has received four federal grants to study the relationship between high-level administrative personnel and their bosses. Her research helped revamp the online administrative management certificate program at West Valley College to reflect the changing needs of technology and the economy.

This gap was irrespective of whether admins and bosses felt they had a good working relationship. However, once the bosses were made more aware of how their admins actually spent the day, they were more than willing to do what they could to make their admins' workload less stressful. The problem is that admins, even high-level ones, are reluctant to ask for help, Gadener says.

For example, admins at one global software company for which Gadener has done consulting were encouraged to do a study amongst themselves to see what additional training they needed and then present their findings to management. The firm offered a generous

amount of money to pay for the study and for the training, but in the end, the admins decided to ask for nothing.

"They chickened out because they were afraid to ask because the budgets are tight," and they felt they really didn't deserve it, Gadener says.

If you're nervous about approaching your boss, consider introducing new ideas in a slow and gradual fashion, says Marie Grealis, an office professional employed with OfficeTeam in Canton, Ohio. She believes that clear, focused "communication" between admins and their bosses is the key to achieving a balance between workplace pressures and molding yourself into a top company asset.

Start a notebook just for "ideas, questions, concerns, suggestions, brainstorming, or inspirations," she suggests. Then decide which issue is the most frustrating or has the most impact on business productivity, or alternately would be least expensive and easiest to resolve. Present this to your boss in a clear, cohesive fashion that outlines both the reason for the change and the benefits to the company, including how it will free your time to handle other key tasks.

"Take note of his or her reaction, questions, or concerns," Grealis says, "If you get a green light, proceed slowly at first, making sure you communicate the benefit to those involved."

Another option if clerical tasks are tipping the scale and keeping you overtime is to consider asking your boss about providing you with some extra help, says Susan Fenner Ph.D., IAAP's manager of education and professional development. Because they earn college credit, interns from a local college won't cost the company money and can come from an administrative, meeting planning, or other program depending on the tasks needed. An occasional temp can ease the pressure during peak work times. If your workload takes a Herculean effort for one person to accomplish year-round, a permanent assistant can free you up for those more brainy tasks for which your expertise is essential.

"Sadly enough, low-level admin jobs are paying very little, so it isn't that much of a stress on the budget; even part-time is good," she adds.

Carving Out Personal Time

Many experts say that our best ideas are fermented in the subconscious during our down or leisure time. One of the most important ways to fend off technology-related stress can simply be to carve out some time for yourself.

Mindful of the link between enhanced workplace productivity and healthy work-life balance, some companies have developed internal programs to reduce employee stress. At Palo Alto, California-based Agilent Laboratories Inc. in Silicon Valley, Executive Assistant Niki Martin has participated in a variety of pilot programs for this very purpose. For example, "Mindfulness Meditation" is a 45-minute program offered twice a week during the lunch break and led by an employee who is an ordained minister.

In order to combat stress, four years ago, Cazelma Groomes, an executive administrative assistant at Agfa Corp. in Wilmington, Massachusetts, teamed up with a coworker to take 30-minute walks during lunch time. They both agreed to avoid office-related topics. She also has a friend and mentor outside the company with whom she seeks guidance about work issues.

"We have an open and honest relationship, which allows me to say what's on my mind or to blow off steam without feeling that she will misunderstand or become offended," Groomes says.

Schmieder applies her "change recognition" philosophy to carving out personal time. Even when working full time, raising three kids, and taking night college classes, she used to bring work home from the office on a regular basis. Then one day someone suggested that she take a vacation day just to "do something I wanted to do."

"When I planned my next year's vacation time, I took a day and went to the Art Institute [in Chicago] all by myself. I was so amazed at what I saw, I never thought about work or even the family. It was a rude awakening to find out how much I was missing, and how quickly I could leave everything behind and totally relax."



Grealis



Groomes



Martin

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