

Digital Overload

It's not just your physical possessions that can lay claim to your emotions—staying on top of your e-clutter is just as important for a stress-free life

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



I still remember my very first MP3 player—it was a small, purple device roughly half the size of my TV remote control, with big silver buttons on it. It could hold ten songs, and to my teenage self, the fact that I could hold almost an entire CD's worth of music in the palm of my hand—without lugging around my beloved but heavy Sony Discman (and all of the CDs that I wanted to play in it)—was astounding. Little did I realise that it was just the brink of the future: Fast forward several years and the digital revolution has taken us to a place where not only do I have more than 3,400 songs on my iPhone, I've also got almost 10,000 pictures on it. Yes, ladies and gents, my name is Yi-Hwa and I am a cyberhoarder. And I'm not alone—cyberhoarding, or the accumulation of digital files (from emails, text and voicemails to pictures and more) is an increasingly common phenomenon.

While on the surface, my always overflowing inbox and full-to-bursting smartphone may not look like they're as constricting as a pile of papers or a stack of CDs, they can cause as much anxiety as physical clutter. The constant pings signalling a new email ferrying its way onto your computer or a new notification on Facebook can leave us unable to focus. It can overload our brains to the point where we are no longer able to efficiently filter out

information, switch quickly between tasks, and keep a strong working memory.

"Clutter is stuck negative energy," says Sherry Borsheim, a speaker, author and productivity expert who founded Simply Productive. "The impact of physical clutter weighs heavily on the mind, which creates mental clutter and confusion, overwhelming us and making us less productive," she says, explaining that digital clutter

can cause the same effect. Indeed, in a report published in *Psychology Today*, Sherrie Bourg Carter, author of *High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout*, states that clutter bombards our minds with excessive stimuli, causing our senses to work overtime and therefore making it more difficult to relax, both physically and mentally. The constant signals that our work is never done, she explains, can lead to feelings of anxiety—not to mention frustration—as we struggle to find what we need and question whether we'll ever get to the bottom of the pile, not to mention guilt and embarrassment over why we're not more organised. A study from the Princeton University Neuroscience Institute found that the multiple stimuli caused by clutter so limits our brain's ability to process information that, as our mental resources are worn down, we're also more likely to wind up

easily distracted and irritable.

She has a point: I shudder to imagine what anyone would think if they took a quick flick through my iPhone's camera roll, and not because I have any dodgy pictures on it—there's just so much *stuff*, much of it useless. And that's not all: At home, I have four external hard drives. I bought them with the best of intentions—to back up my photos, work, videos and music, respectively, but somehow they've each wound up clogged with files that don't really belong there and, thanks to my extremely time-poor lifestyle, my promises to myself to deal with them later have resulted in a bit of a digital nightmare. Like Monica's secret closet of mess in *Friends*, amidst my usually neat and tidy apartment, my cluttered computer, external hard drives and even my iPhone are my dirty little secret.

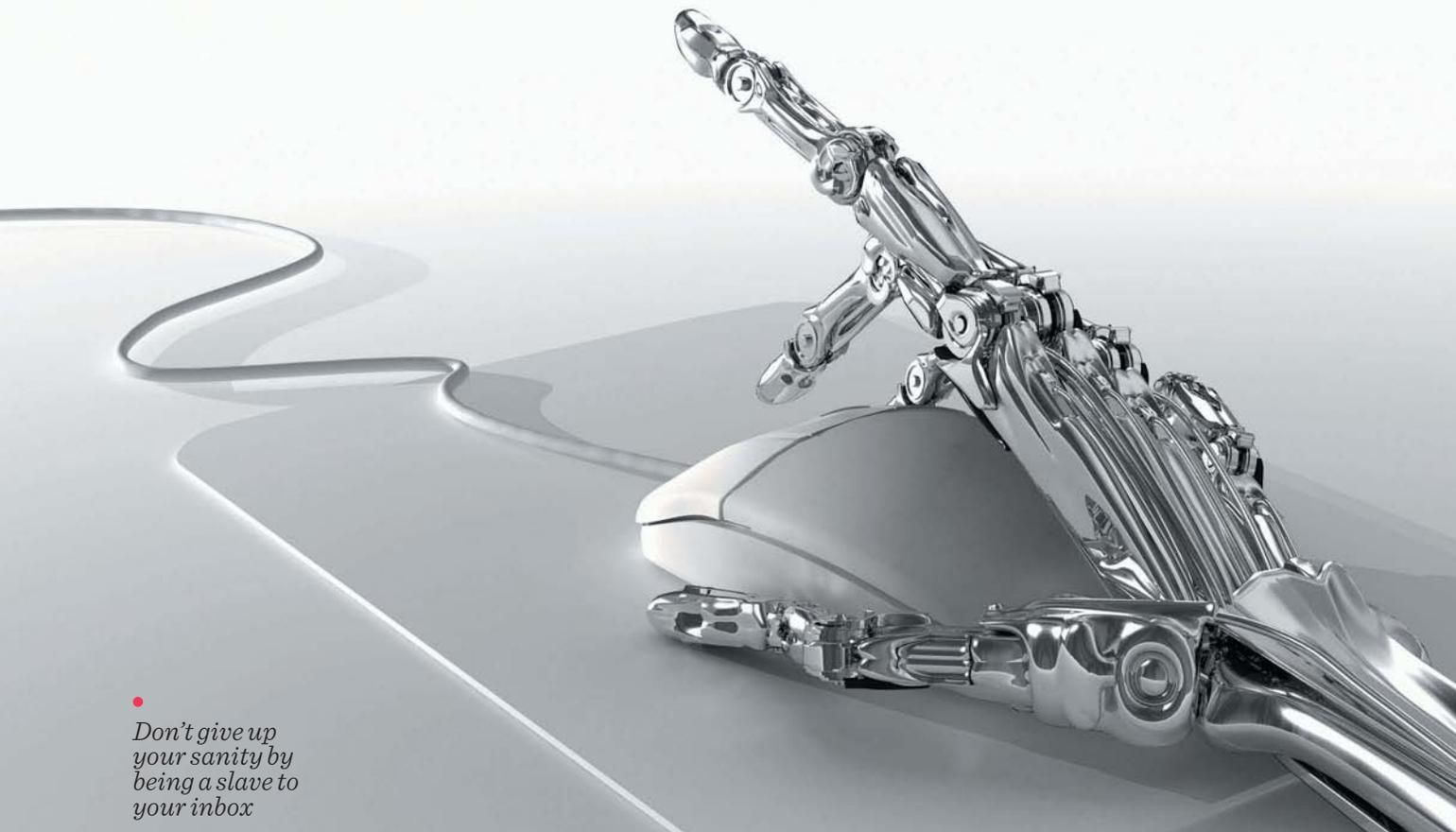
Since I'm well aware of the problem, why is it so hard to just clean it up? According to

experts, getting rid of stuff actually hurts us—a study from Yale University found that letting go of items we own and feel connected to can trigger a reaction in the parts of our brain associated with pain—meaning losing a valued possession can actually cause us the same kind of distress as a painful physical stimulant such as burning ourselves with a hot drink. In fact, research from the Anxiety Disorders Center at Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living found that compulsive hoarding—which is often seen as a symptom or subtype of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—can impact our ability to make solid decisions, even if our obsessive behaviour is creating high levels of stress. Experts claim that it's because many of us believe that by throwing something away, we're discarding the memory associated with that object—and its these erroneous beliefs that prevent us from letting go.

Can the idea of deleting all of those useless repeat pictures, songs I'll never listen to again, or my 30-page college paper on international economics (which I will *definitely* never read again) really be so daunting because I'm afraid of what getting rid of them will mean? Or is it because I'm anxious that I'll make a decision I may regret?

HAVE A GAME PLAN

In all my previous attempts to clear up my ever-growing pile of e-clutter, I've started with the best of intentions only to wind up giving up, frustrated, half a day later—and, it turns out, I'm not alone. According to Sherry, this yo-yo attitude to organising is our most common downfall: "[People] start in one area, realise an item belongs in another room, and so they go to the other room only to realise there's more clutter there and then hours later they're exhausted, and come back to the original room only to find



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*Don't give up
your sanity by
being a slave to
your inbox*



Does your e-filing system need a good clear-out?

that they didn't accomplish what they wanted to get done," she says. It's the same when it comes to digital organisation — too often, we'll sort things onto various hard drives only to become distracted by other files, losing focus on finishing the task in hand. So what's the solution? Much like any good fitness regime, the key is to start with a game plan, and remind yourself of your successes to stay motivated along the way, Sherry says. "I teach my clients this strategy: Top to bottom, left to right. My secret to creating a dramatic visible result is to start with the visible piles first, and work left to right systematically. Once you see you've cleared and organised an area, you're motivated to organise the next," she says.

The goal for clearing digital clutter, Sherry says, is to be able to find information fast when you need it. There are three main categories we need to

tackle: Emails in our inbox, our computer or server folders, and contacts groups or categories. "In each of these areas, plan first before you create the new folder structures. This will save you a ton of time and you can see the bigger picture of how you want to access your files. Ask yourself, 'What are the main roles and responsibilities of my job? How do I want to group topics together?'" Make your broad categories intuitive and easy for you and others to retrieve files." Once you've created the new structure, Sherry advises moving old files into the new folders as you use them, and scheduling in time for bulk moves.

Next, try following her "FAST Workflow Principle": File, Act, Schedule and Toss. Toss or delete anything you don't need. Schedule any emails that you need to, and then toss them or file them. If an email takes less than 30 seconds, deal with it— if it takes

ARE YOU A CYBERHOARDER?

How do you know if you need to let go of some e-clutter? Sherry Borsheim of SimplyProductive.com shares the key signs:

1. You constantly waste time looking for digital files.
2. Others frequently have to wait for you and you're usually holding them up.
3. You have plenty of clutter on your computer desktop.
4. You often get frustrated by how much time you're wasting finding information, and you take longer than necessary to finish work.
5. You have no folder structure at all, in both your inbox and e-filing system.
6. Your computer runs slow.
7. Your photos are a jumbled mess in various folders.
8. You get a notification stating you've exceeded your email inbox limit.

longer, put it into an 'action' folder or delegate it. File any emails that you need to keep for future reference. Once you've finally cleared your inbox to zero, maintain files on a regular basis (Sherry recommends doing this quarterly)—clean out action folders monthly or quarterly depending on your need and, twice a year, assign yourself a "file cleanout day" where you archive old emails and computer files—and any associated paper files. If it's photos you're trying to tackle, follow the same principle.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Once things are cleared out, it's important to ensure you don't wind up back where you started—this is easier said than done if you have a constantly jam-packed schedule. But it *can* be done if you adopt a few simple daily habits, Sherry insists: "[Always] put things back in the right place. It only takes a few extra seconds, but it saves you minutes later on and

reduces stress. Have a plan for your day and schedule one or two power blocks of 60-90 minutes each in which to get your most important tasks done—be proactive instead of reactive. You have a choice to manage your day, or you can let other people tell you what to do—take back control of your day.” Sherry recommends treating your power hour as a sacred time: “Turn off all buzzers and notifications, let other people know you are not available, and set a timer. There’s something about the clock ticking down that makes you more productive,” she says.

Finally, don’t forget to back things up—after all, you’ve spent all that time organising your files so your digital information is as efficient and accessible as you need it to be; you don’t want to risk it all crashing in a mere moment. “Have multiple backups, offsite, and test [them] on a regular basis to make sure your data is actually being backed up and that you can use it,” Sherry advises, adding: “I use a combination of cloud storage and hard drives. My preference is Google Drive because it works on [both] PC and Mac devices, it’s easy to share

documents with others, and it’s cost-effective for the amount of storage they give you. My computer files are backed up in the cloud and are accessible from anywhere, on any device. I recommend you have a large capacity hard drive to back up your computer files and a portable hard drive that you can take with you, if necessary, when you travel.” How often you should back up your files you’re creating, but doing so at least once a week is a wise idea.

Still feel intimidated? Don’t—this is the perfect time of year to begin your organisational

plan of action: “Schedule your monthly and quarterly reviews in January—regular planning and reviews are times to debrief what’s working, what’s not working, and what you want to do differently. You can review your technological requirements during this process and see where the gaps are,” Sherry advises. “Make it a habit to file files in the right place at the time of use. I can’t stress this enough. ‘I’ll deal with it later’ is the number one reason clutter piles up digitally and physically.” So, what are you waiting for? Better get cracking! ■

LET’S GET SOCIAL

Thanks to the popularity of social media, e-clutter can creep in anywhere from your computer to your iPhone. Keeping it streamlined can be tough, so we got the 411 from Tom Otton, the managing director of Create Media Group (createmedia-group.com)—a digital agency specialising in social media, that manages global brands across the region.

Social media can be a great way to stay on top of both regional and international news, but with so many great sources out there nowadays they can actually wind up being a constant distraction that makes it harder for us to focus our attention. How can we curate our feeds a little more selectively?

Let’s take a step back first: Are your social media channels your preferred source of news? Many might still prefer to develop a list of key websites and blogs that they visit for their daily dose of industry and world news whilst keeping social channels primarily personal, although this line is becoming increasingly blurred. As for curation, it’s simple as ‘the more you put in, the more you get out.’ You can easily unfollow friends and brands so that they no longer clutter your newsfeed—I’d suggest doing this regularly, and being wise about what you “Like.” Just because you like a brand doesn’t necessarily mean that you want to receive their content regularly. An under-utilised tool on

Facebook is the “Save” function: if you tap the top right inverted arrow on a post with a link, you’ll be able to save it for later without it distracting you from what you’re currently doing. It’s a great way to curate a resourceful reading list for when you have some downtime. With Twitter, make sure you’re creating “Lists,” placing accounts into relevant lists so you don’t miss out on content from sources you want to hear from.

There are so many different digital media channels, from Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to Pinterest, Tumblr and YouTube, it’s near impossible for the average person to stay on top of them—or at least, get the best use out of them. How can we assess which are best suited to us?

This all depends on your strategy. An easy first question you need to ask is, “Why am I on social media?” Once you have answered that question, from either a personal or professional perspective, you can start to look at the best channels suited to your goals. It may be something as simple as you wanting to stay in touch with family overseas, in which case Facebook would be your ideal choice. If your goal is to connect and partner with influencers in your industry, then perhaps Twitter would be best.

Digital newsletters are the bane of many of our lives—do you think there’s any use in subscribing to them, and if so, how do we choose which ones to subscribe to?

These are still very useful tools for both parties. I dislike spam as much as the next person, but when an entirely opt-in community is created around a

subject that people feel passionately about, then newsletters can benefit you by being an ideal summary of a larger body of information. I would unsubscribe to any mailer that doesn’t serve a direct purpose for me, but when I get a weekly newsletter from a valued industry blog that I may not have had time to visit every day that week, then it can be a perfect summary of what I may have missed. It’s the same concept behind why I would “Like” their Facebook page to receive their updates.

Constant updates and our “have it now” culture mean even something as simple as maintaining a healthy social media account can be a real drain on our time and energy. What are the best apps out there for accessing all of our accounts from one place, and what can we do with those that aren’t supported by such dashboards?

If your purpose for being on social media is simply personal and doesn’t have a commercial angle, I don’t think you need to worry too much about management apps. If, however, you’re looking to use them for sales or marketing purposes and especially if you are managing multiple accounts across platforms, then that’s different. Hootsuite is my platform of choice—it’s simple to use and works with my key platforms. The day Instagram allows third party mobile apps to integrate fully, there will be a lot of happy people working in social media! In the meantime, try Instapull—it’s a desktop platform that allows you to connect multiple accounts and schedule posts, which really helps.

After years of adding friends, acquaintances, old colleagues, business contacts and so on, our social media feeds can become bloated, leading to diluted feeds full of information that may not interest us anymore. Do you think it’s wise to do a clear-out every now and then, or is it better to simply hide the posts?

Why burn a bridge when you don’t need to? I think having certain people on a restricted list so they can’t see all of your personal content that you share with friends is a good idea—however, the reason the curation tool on Facebook or the privacy settings on other channels are there is to allow you to interact with different people in different ways. Make use of them.

Do you think it’s healthy to take a break from using social media once in a while?

If you’re using social media for personal reasons, sure—it’s good to disconnect from the chaos of life sometimes. If you are promoting a brand or building a community, then no. You need to be consistent. It’s a two-way conversation with your customers, so if they want to engage then you need to be there.

What are your top three tips for getting the most out of your social media channels?

1) Have a strategy—know why you are there. 2) Be consistent—if you are known for something, then stay on brand (that can be a personal brand, too.) 3) Read at least one blog regularly, to stay on top of platform changes. I recommend socialmediaexaminer.com.