Experience

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Are you too collaborative?
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ILLUSTRATION BY ROMUALDO FAURA

COLLABORATION WITHOUT BURNOUT

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***"SO MANY DIFFERENT** people can get to you through different channels, and the pressure is enormous."*

"Constant e-mail, international travel, calls at all hours—I was exhausted. The collaborative demands eventually wore me down."

"I always felt I had to do more, go further, save the day. I would become people's life raft and then almost drown."

These are the voices of collaborative overload.

As organizations become more global, adopt matrixed structures, offer increasingly complex products and services, and enable 24/7 communication, they are requiring employees to collaborate with more internal colleagues and external contacts than ever before. According to research from

Connected Commons, most managers now spend 85% or more of their work time on e-mail, in meetings, and on the phone, and the demand for such activities has jumped by 50% over the past decade. Companies benefit, of course: Faster innovation and more-seamless client service are two by-products of greater collaboration. But along with all this comes significantly less time for focused individual work, careful reflection, and sound decision making. A 2016 HBR article coauthored by one of us dubbed this destructive phenomenon *collaborative overload* and suggested ways that organizations might combat it.

Over the past few years we've conducted further research—both quantitative and qualitative—to better understand the problem and uncover solutions that individuals can implement on their own. Working with 20 global organizations in diverse fields (software, consumer products, professional services, manufacturing, and life sciences), we started by creating models of employees' collaborations and considering the effect of those interactions on engagement, performance, and voluntary attrition. We then used network analyses to identify efficient collaborators—people who work productively with a wide variety of others but use the least amount of their own and their colleagues' time—and interviewed 200 of them (100 men and 100 women) about their working lives. We learned a great deal about how overload happens and what leaders must do to avoid it so that they can continue to thrive.

Not surprisingly, we found that always-on work cultures, encroaching technology, demanding bosses, difficult clients, and inefficient coworkers were a big part of the problem, and most of those challenges do require organizational solutions. But we discovered in many cases that external time sinks were matched by another enemy: individuals' own mindsets and habits. Fortunately, people can overcome those obstacles themselves, right away, with some strategic self-management.

We uncovered best practices in three broad categories: *beliefs* (understanding why we take on too much); *role, schedule, and network* (eliminating unnecessary collaboration to make time for work that is aligned with professional aspirations and personal values); and *behavior* (ensuring that necessary or desired collaborative work is as productive as possible). Not all our recommendations will suit everyone: People's needs differ by personality, hierarchical level, and work context. But we found that when the people we studied took action on just four or five of them, they were able to claw back 18% to 24% of their collaborative time.

TWO TYPES OF OVERLOAD

Collaborative overload generally occurs in either a surge or a slow burn. A surge can result from a promotion, a request from a boss or a colleague to take on or help out with a project, or the desire to jump into an "extracurricular" work activity because you feel obligated or don't want to miss out. Consider Mike, an insurance company executive who was already managing multiple projects—one of which had his entire team working day and night to turn around a struggling segment of the business. When his boss asked him to help create a new unit that would allow the company to present a single face to the market, he felt he couldn't say no. It was a great development opportunity—to which his skills were perfectly suited—and it offered prime exposure to senior management. Yet he couldn't abandon his existing team in the midst of its work. So he decided to do both jobs at once.

A slow burn is more insidious and occurs through incremental increases in the volume, diversity, and pace of collaborative demands over time, as personal effectiveness leads to larger networks and greater scope of responsibilities. Go-to people in organizations suffer from this type of overload. As we gain experience, we often tend to take on more work, and our identities start to become intertwined with accomplishment, helping, or being in the know. We tend not to question what we are doing as we add tasks or work late into the night on e-mail. And, of course, our colleagues welcome these tendencies; as we gain reputations for competence and responsiveness, people in our networks bring us more work and requests. Ellen, an 18-year veteran of a *Fortune* 100 technology company, is a case in point. She was fiercely driven and took pride in her ability to help colleagues, solve problems, and cut through bureaucracy to get things done. Eventually, however, she felt weighed down by a list of projects and commitments that were "beyond the realm of doable."

Though Mike's and Ellen's situations are different, our research suggests that the solutions to their and others' overload problems are similar. They cannot continue to work the same way they always have and remain effective. They need to take better charge of their working lives.

RECOGNIZE HOW MUCH OVERLOAD IS DRIVEN BY YOUR DESIRE TO MAINTAIN A REPUTATION AS HELPFUL, KNOWLEDGEABLE, OR INFLUENTIAL.

WHY WE TAKE ON TOO MUCH

The first step in combating collaborative overload is to recognize how much of it is driven by your own desire to maintain a reputation as a helpful, knowledgeable, or influential colleague or to avoid the anxiety that stems from ceding control over or declining to participate in group work. For example, someone who engages in the entire life cycle of a small project, beyond the time when the need for her expertise has passed, might pride herself on supporting teammates and ensuring a high-quality result. But that's not the kind of collaboration that makes a difference over the long term; indeed, too much of it will prevent her from doing more-important work.

Knowing why you accept collaborative work—above and beyond what your manager and your company demand—is how you begin to combat overload. When we counsel executives, we ask them to reflect on the specific identity-based triggers that most often lead them into overload. For example: Do you crave the feeling of accomplishment that comes from ticking less challenging items off your to-do list? Does your ambition to be influential or recognized for your expertise cause you to attend meetings or discussions that don't truly require your involvement? Do you pride yourself on being always ready to answer questions and pitch in on group work? Do you agree to take on collaborative activities because you're worried about being labeled a poor performer or not a team player? Are you uncomfortable staying away from certain issues or projects because you fear missing out on something or aren't sure the work will be done right without you? Most executives we've encountered answer yes to one if not several of those questions.

Efficient collaborators remember that saying yes to something always means saying no to—or participating less fully in—something else. They remind themselves that small wins (an empty in-box, a perfectly worded report, a single client call) are not always important ones. They think carefully about their areas of expertise and determine when they do, or don't, have value to add. They stop seeing themselves as indispensable and shift the source of their self-worth so that it comes from not just showcasing their own capabilities but also stepping away to let others develop theirs and gain visibility.

As one executive told us, "I have come to the realization that if people really need me, they will find me. I am probably skipping 30% of my meetings now, and work seems to be getting done just fine."

When Mike found himself at a breaking point with his twin projects, he realized how much of his self-worth derived from always saying yes to—and then achieving—the goals suggested to him. "It took falling down and a patient spouse to really see this pattern," he says. He decided that he needed to set clear priorities in both his career and his personal life. "Then saying no was not about my not coming through but about maintaining focus on what mattered."

Ellen, too, realized that her self-image as a helper—constantly looking for opportunities to contribute and never declining a request—had become problematic. "The difficult part is recognizing this tendency in the moment and working hard not to jump in," she acknowledges. "But I told my team how important this was and also asked a few people to be 'truth tellers' who caution me when they see it happening."

ELIMINATING THE UNNECESSARY

Next you'll need to restructure your role, schedule, and network to avoid the triggers you've identified and reduce or eliminate unnecessary collaboration. Rather than thinking things will get better on their own, living reactively, and falling into patterns dictated by other people's objectives, efficient collaborators play offense on collaborative overload. They clarify their "north star" objectives—the strengths they want to employ in their work and the values they want to embody, in the context of their organization's priorities—and then streamline their working lives in a way that buffers them against nonaligned requests.

EFFICIENT COLLABORATORS THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT THEIR AREAS OF EXPERTISE AND DETERMINE WHEN THEY DO, OR DON'T, HAVE VALUE TO ADD.

Start by reviewing your calendar and e-mail communications on a regular basis, using a tool such as Microsoft's MyAnalytics or Cisco's "human network intelligence" platform. Look back four or five months to identify recurring group activities, meetings, or exchanges that aren't core to your success and could be declined or offered to others as a developmental opportunity. Consider decisions you're being pulled into unnecessarily and how processes or teams might be changed so that you needn't be involved. Recognize when you're being sought out for information or expertise in areas no longer central to your role or ambitions and figure out whether you could share your knowledge more widely on your company's intranet or if another go-to person might derive greater benefit from that collaboration.

At the same time, work to reset colleagues' expectations about the level and timeliness of your engagement. Clarify, for example, that not responding to a group e-mail or opting out of a meeting does not mean you lack interest or appreciation. Talk about your key priorities so that everyone knows what you need (and want) to spend the most time on. Ask colleagues about their interests and ambitions so that you can identify opportunities to distribute or delegate work. A key inflection point for all the executives we've counseled has been when they start seeing requests for collaboration as ways to activate and engage those in their networks rather than as adding to their own to-do lists.

Finally, block out time for reflective work and seek collaboration with those who can help you move toward your north star objectives. Mike focused on building capabilities in the business unit he directed. Instead of jumping at unrelated projects for political exposure, he began to differentiate himself through expertise and his team's contribution. Ellen's strategy was to create exceptionally clear boundaries: "I am there 8 AM to 6 PM, and people know I give 100%

To evaluate your state of collaborative overload, go to networkassessments.org and take the assessment built from this research.

then. But after that I don't let myself get drawn into unnecessary e-mail, calls, or late-night work just to help out."

Another leader described the shift like this: "Playing defense sucks. You are always reactive and living in fear. The only way to escape it is to get clarity on who you are and what you want to do and start forging a path and network that enable you to get there."

KEEPING IT PRODUCTIVE

Once you've taken stock of your collaborative workload, it's time to enhance the value of the collaboration you've chosen to participate in. Our research suggests that poorly run meetings are the biggest time sink in organizations. Even if you don't control the ones you attend, you can make them more productive by, for example, asking the leader to circulate an agenda or a pre-read before the gathering and a short e-mail on agreements, commitments, and next steps afterward. You can also limit your involvement by explaining that you have a hard stop (real or constructed) so that you're not stuck when others run overtime, and asking to attend only those portions for which you are needed or agreeing to half the time a colleague or employee requests. It's crucial to establish norms early on in any relationship or group. If you wait, problems will become harder to address.

You can also institute or encourage new norms for e-mails by addressing format (for example, observing a maximum length and choosing an outline structure with bullets, as opposed to full-text paragraphs), the use of "cc" and "reply all," and appropriate response times for various types of requests. Consider virtual collaboration tools (such as Google Docs), which offer a better medium for work that is exploratory (defining a problem space or brainstorming solutions) or integrative (when people with varying expertise, perspectives, or work assignments need to produce a joint solution). The key is to ensure that you're using the right tools at the right time and not worsening collaborative demands. You should also learn to recognize when a conversation has become too complicated or contentious for e-mail or chat and switch to a more efficient phone call or face-to-face meeting.

For one-on-one interactions, always consider whether you are consuming your counterpart's time efficiently. Ask yourself, "Am I clear on what I want to accomplish from a meeting or a conversation?" And invite others to be equally disciplined by asking early on, "So that I use your time well, would you quickly let me know what you hope we can accomplish together?"

When it comes to building your network, focus on the quality of the relationships, not the number of connections. We repeatedly found that efficient collaborators draw people to collaborative work by conferring status, envisioning joint success, diffusing ownership, and generating a sense of purpose and energy around an outcome. By creating "pull"—rather than simply pushing their agenda—they get greater and more-aligned participation and build trust so that people don't feel the need to seek excessive input or approval.

Ellen, for example, decided to engage stakeholders in collaborative work early to save time later in the process. "I used to dot every i and cross every t before approaching others," she says. "But I've learned that if I get a plan partially developed and then bring in my team, my boss, even my clients, they get invested and help me spot flaws, and I avoid tons of downstream work to fix things or convince people." Another leader we know schedules one-on-ones with direct reports to discuss priorities, values, and personal aspirations, enhancing their ability to work together efficiently as a team in the future. "There are so many ways people can misinterpret actions and then cause a lot of churn later," he says. "If I spend the time to give them a sense of where I'm coming from, it saves all sorts of time in unnecessary collaborations."

THE RECENT EXPLOSION in the volume and diversity of collaborative demands is a reality that's here to stay. Unfortunately, the invisible nature of these demands means that few organizations are managing collaborative activity strategically. So it falls to you, the individual, to fight overload and reclaim your collaborative time.

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