

Why less on the chart and fewer charts works better:

With too much information, people's decisions make less and less sense. For earlier generations, informed decisions simply meant the due diligence of looking things up in a reference book.

Today, with Twitter and Facebook and countless apps fed into our smart phones, the flow of facts and opinion never stops. That can be a good thing, as when information empowers workers and consumers, not to mention whistle-blowers and revolutionaries.

Yet a surfeit of information is changing the way we think, not always for the better. You are a victim of info-paralysis. The Oxford English Dictionary added "information fatigue" in 2009.

Trying to drink from a fire hose of information has harmful cognitive effects, in our ability to make smart, creative, successful decisions. The booming science of decision making has shown that more information can lead to objectively poorer choices.

Decisions requiring creativity benefit from letting the problem incubate below the level of awareness -- something that becomes ever-more difficult when information never stops arriving. Every bit of incoming information presents a choice: whether to pay attention, whether to reply, whether to factor it into an impending decision. But decision science has shown that people faced with a plethora of choices are apt to make no decision at all.

If we manage to make a decision despite info-deluge, the more information we try to assimilate, the more we tend to regret the many foregone options. In a world of limitless information, regret over the decisions we make becomes more common. We chafe at the fact that identifying the best feels impossible.

A key reason for information's diminishing or even negative returns is the limited capacity of the brain's working memory.

It can hold roughly seven items.

Anything more must be processed into long-term memory. That takes conscious effort, as when you study for an exam. The ceaseless influx trains us to respond instantly, sacrificing accuracy and thoughtfulness to the false god of immediacy. We're seeing a

preference for the quick over the right, in large part because so many decisions have to be made.

The notion that the quick decision is better is becoming normative.

The brain is really bad at giving only a little weight to a piece of information. People give the less predictive info more weight than it deserves. Creative decisions are more likely to bubble up from a brain that applies unconscious thought to a problem, rather than going at it in a full-frontal, analytical assault.

A constant focus on the new makes it harder for information to percolate just below conscious awareness, where it can combine in ways that spark smart decisions.

One of the greatest surprises in decision science is the discovery that some of our best decisions are made through unconscious processes. The prefrontal cortex that waves a white flag under an onslaught of information plays a key role in your gut-level, emotional decision-making system. It hooks up feelings about various choices with the output of the rational brain.

If emotions are shut out of the decision-making process, we're likely to overthink a decision, and that has been shown to produce worse outcomes on even the simplest tasks. Experts advise dealing with e-mails and texts in batches, rather than in real time; that should let your unconscious decision-making system kick in.

Avoid the trap of thinking that a decision requiring you to assess a lot of complex information is best made methodically and consciously; you will do better, and regret less, if you let your unconscious turn it over by removing yourself from the info influx.

Set priorities: if a choice turns on only a few criteria, focus consciously on those. Some people are better than others at ignoring extra information. These "sufficers" are able to say enough: They channel-surf until they find an acceptable show and then stop, whereas "maximizers" never stop surfing, devouring information, and so struggle to make a decision and move on. If you think you're a maximizer, the best prescription for you might be the "off" switch on your smart phone.

-- Sharon Begley, Newsweek