[brief]

make a bigger impact
by saying less

Joseph
McCormack

WILEY

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FOREWORD

When Joe asked me to write the foreword, I was literally in the middle of wrapping up my own book (*Scaling Up*) and I thought I couldn't do it.

I wanted to do something special (and brief!) and you know how hard it is to say something brief. Then, I changed my mind.

Read the book.

You're busy; we all are.

Be a master of brevity. Now get started.

—Verne Harnish, Founder and CEO of Gazelles

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first told my wife, Montse, and kids that I was writing a book called *BRIEF*, the jokes started flying. You could only imagine their comments. My friends and extended family followed suit saying the book should be only 10 pages long.

Funny … I'm still laughing.

All kidding aside, I want to thank all of them, particularly my wife, for their constant love and support. It has been wonderful to see their nonstop encouragement.

As for my coworkers, clients, and close collaborators, this book has given me a unique opportunity to have deeper conversations and start to dream with them about the possibilities of a "less is more" world. On many occasions, they have taken time from their day job to lend me a hand. In particular, Johnny, Angelo, Angela, and Megan have been invaluable to get *BRIEF* airborne.

There are a few people, Meghan and Joyce at Sheffield and Christine Moore at John Wiley & Sons, whom I have depended on throughout with an honest editorial push to omit needless words and make this a better book.

Regarding my current and former clients, I have shared their insights, commentary, successes, and failures all while respecting their confidentiality and excluding any sensitive information they have shared with me. In particular, I have changed some first names and omitted surnames of those serving in our country's Special Operations community.

Finally, for all of those that I have interviewed for this book—a heartfelt thank you. Truly, this is a topic that affects us all.

PREFACE

Why BRIEF?

In our attention-deficit economy, being brief is what's desperately needed and rarely delivered.

When we fail to be clear and concise, the consequences can be brutal: wasted time, money, and resources; decisions made in confusion; worthy ideas rejected; people sent off in wrong directions; done deals that always seem to stall.

As the founder of a boutique marketing agency that helps clients such as Harley-Davidson, BMO Harris Bank, MasterCard, and W. W. Grainger get their stories straight, I know this is a rare skill.

For years, business and military leaders have complained to me about the same things. Mixed messages keep missing the mark. People are not on the same page. Long-winded presentations go nowhere.

For businesses to succeed in an information-laden and hyper-busy economy, the rambling has to stop. So I decided to write BRIEF, a step-by-step approach to get to the point quickly.

Anyone can learn how to make what's complex clear. After my firm was in business for just a few years, I was invited to develop an original curriculum for U.S. Special Operations Command in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It turned out that some of the most elite members of our military were weak communicators. They

admitted their mission-critical briefs were painfully long, buried in details, and impossible to decipher.

The transformative work with Special Operations was—and still is—incredibly rewarding. That's how BRIEF was born. It's about lean communication. It's like Six Sigma for your mouth.

After a few days in our Narrative Mapping courses, I saw an immediate shift. They were able to leverage storytelling skills and BRIEF techniques to be clear and compelling when explaining complex missions. They delivered complicated information efficiently and effectively, with clearer context and more compelling explanations. They used fewer PowerPoint presentations. As a result, the leaders fostered better and more engaging conversations.

One of the participants commented, "The difference is dramatic. Our briefs can prove that less is more."

I believe the lessons learned with U.S. Special Operations can be used in the corporate world by those who want to be concise and clear when sharing their story.

You're busy, so I've designed the book to be immediately useful. If you read and follow along actively, you will learn to create clarity and meaning and drive out waste and confusion.

The book is organized around a new form of ADD: awareness, discipline, and decisiveness.

Part One: Awareness—the conviction to hold yourself and others to a higher standard of succinctness

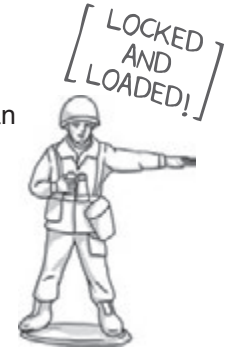
Part Two: Discipline—the BRIEF approach to producing the mental muscle memory necessary to make you a lean communicator every time

Part Three: Decisiveness—the ability to recognize key moments when you need to convey what really matters effectively and efficiently

[brief] BITS

Brevity is a choice.

When you want to get more, decide to say less. Those who want to succeed—even thrive—in an attention-deficit economy are masters of lean communication. They stand out, their ideas are seen and heard, and their companies succeed. Decide that being brief is your non-negotiable standard.



As I have seen firsthand, BRIEF tackles an issue that won't go away unless we become lean communicators and let our ideas stand out.

Are you ready?

This won't take long.

[brief]

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

PART	INTRO	I	II	III	IV
QUESTION	WHY?	WHY NOW?	HOW?	WHEN/ WHERE?	WHAT'S NEXT?
TITLE	Why BRIEF and the New ADD	Heightened Awareness in a World Begging for BRIEF	How to Gain Discipline to be Clear and Concise	Gaining the Decisiveness to Know When and Where to be BRIEF	Being BRIEF: Summary and Action Plan
IN SIX WORDS	Discover BRIEF's main premise and promise	Feed world hunger for the point	Techniques to be clear and concise	Times to deliver "less is more"	Live it daily or lose it
THE GIST	Author's short story behind the birth of BRIEF and what every reader should expect	Flooded with information, interruptions, and inattentive-ness, people are begging for less	Handful of practical approaches to develop the muscle to manage people's attention and stand out	Knowing and navigating the key moments when and where to use lean communication to make an impact	Series of practical insights and challenges to ensure you sustain the skill over time
YOUR FEELING	 Curious		 Captivated		 Committed
BOTTOM LINE	The new, non-negotiable standard in business	A brutal concern and a prerequisite for success today	There's hope for all types of people to tighten up their game	There's a time and place for the "less is more" mandate	Tips to ensure your BRIEF muscle gets in shape and stays that way

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

BRIEF was deliberately designed to be easy to read and immediately useful. To this end, we've added multiple recurring features and visual elements that quickly grasp the book's benefits.

► **BRIEF BITS** –These short sections offer memorable insights on how to be BRIEF. The military figure accompanying each of them is a reminder that we have to take a more disciplined, mindful approach to be sure we're always clear and concise.

► **BRIEF BASICS**–This handful of critical techniques are essential to being BRIEF. A solid understanding of these BRIEF BASICS is key to being a lean communicator.

► **EXECUTIVE ATTENTION**–Meet two modern executives whose lives are impacted by other people's inability to be BRIEF. Each scene depicts the problems they face and how brevity can turn things around.

Part One
Awareness

Heightened Awareness in a World Begging for BRIEF

1 Why Brevity Is Vital

Long story, short. Executives are busy, and your rambling presentation gets lost in their daily flood of information.

Get to the Point or Pay the Price

You cannot afford to miss the boat on brevity. It's the difference between success and failure. And if you think you've already got it covered, you're wrong.

I've spoken with hundreds of leaders and executives over 20 years and heard countless stories about how someone's inability to get to the point quickly spelled disaster. The dysfunction is real, immediate, and lasting.

Here are a few examples.

- *General dismissal*: A field-grade Army officer uses a series of PowerPoint slides to deliver a brief to his superiors on a recommended strategic course of action. He watches his presentation unravel as a high-ranking general obsessed with details spends the entire time feverishly highlighting every single typographical error on the handout. The officer lost his audience in the minutiae.
- *A rising star stalls*: A brilliant young woman who looks as if she is right out of Central Casting—bright, talented, and attractive—is widely recognized by senior leadership as the

future go-to person. Her fatal flaw is well known, however: she cannot close big deals because she cannot shut up. Her motormouth bars her from any client-facing assignments.

- *Done deal comes undone*: After closing a $500,000 contract with a new client, a sales executive is shocked to discover that his overenthusiastic support person has followed up with the client and explained all the reasons why he thinks they've purchased way more technology than they need. The verbal misstep drops the deal by $200,000.
- *98-pager delivered*: A vice president of communications who's frantically looking for a simple, one-page product summary for a big press release discovers that the best her organization can deliver is a mega PowerPoint file with nearly 100 slides. It chokes her e-mail inbox and kills the story.
- *Hero's story overlooked*: A police detective takes the initiative to recognize a fellow officer's generosity and impact with disabled athletes by pitching his feel-good story to a major magazine. A reporter speaks to the detective, who unfortunately cannot quickly sum up his pitch and rambles on. The reporter becomes too confused and doesn't run the story.
- *Luncheon leaves a bad taste*: Three hundred busy executives attend a fundraiser for a nonprofit organization during their busy workweek. The keynote speaker is slotted 20 minutes after the meal. He blows far beyond the allotted time, and after nearly an hour, the room is half empty and the feel-good charity loses its appeal.

You get the point. Today's world is on information overload, and there isn't enough time to sift through all the messages. If you can't capture people's attention and deliver your message with brevity, you'll lose them.

Executive—Interrupted

I once met an executive named Ed who was a lot like many business leaders nowadays—easily distracted.

"I've got way too much going on in my life and in my head," he lamented. "It seems like my mind is under constant assault throughout the day. There are nonstop e-mails, meetings, calls, interruptions, and information," he explained. "It's taxing."

Ed continued, "A few weeks ago. I had a really important meeting with a small agency about the launch of a new advertising campaign targeting younger buyers. It's tough reaching that segment and getting their attention, so I was really interested to see their strategies, timelines, and plans."

Even though Ed disliked meetings, his interest in the topic had him surprisingly geared up. But when I asked how the meeting went, he replied, "We had an hour scheduled. They assured me their PowerPoint was only a few slides, but they were pretty densely packed with research and recommendations. Although they kept the slide count down, they jammed every inch they could."

"They were probably trying to keep it short and to the point for you. But it sounds like there was way too much to cover," I said.

"And that wasn't even half the problem," Ed said. "About 5 minutes into the meeting, I feel my phone go off in my pocket. False alarm—you know, one of those phantom rings when your leg vibrates and the phone's not even there when you check. I eventually found it in my bag—and by then, I'd already been digging around for it and not really paying attention to their presentation.

[brief] BASICS

THE ELUSIVE 600:
MANAGING EXCESS MENTAL BANDWIDTH

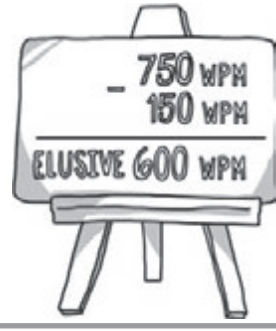
People speak about 150 words per minute, yet have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number, or 750 words per minute.

You're having a conversation with some old friends at a college reunion, and they start talking about some hilarious memories. While they're recounting your exploits, your mind immediately **races** to an incident from your senior year with an old flame. You recall in vivid detail how painful it was when you ended the relationship. You imagine the entire break up scene, while listening to and laughing with your buddies **at the same time**. Two separate conversations run through your mind simultaneously.

This phenomenon of thinking about one thing while listening to and engaging in a conversation about another is called **the Elusive 600**—and it's always at work. Here's how it happens:

People speak about 150 words per minute, yet they have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number—750 words per minute. So while someone is speaking, you have **600 extra words per minute** to think other thoughts. Your mind's spare bandwidth is always present when you're speaking or listening. This is the cause of many of the issues that make brevity relevant. For example, some implications of the Elusive 600 are:

- **It can leak.** Others' ideas can easily pop into your mind while you are talking, and you might impulsively start sharing them.
- **It sets off triggers.** While you are either listening or speaking, a single word or an unrelated distraction can cause you to lose focus.
- **It needs to be managed.** Whether you're talking or listening, you have the responsibility to manage your Elusive 600.



"Then I notice that I really had gotten a text from my wife, which I of course impulsively check. She tells me that there was a past-due financial aid packet I needed to send in for my daughter's college fall semester—so I have to respond, too."

"It happens to all of us. You've got a smartphone, so people can find you no matter where you are or what you're doing," I add, trying to excuse him.

"Right—but this time I am in a super important meeting, and we are 10 minutes into it and the agency guys start asking me questions. I get a little defensive and even nervous, because I know I haven't been listening carefully," he admits.

"It's like getting caught in high school daydreaming when the teacher calls on you," I sympathize.

"Right. So I try to get things back on track and apologize. I conveniently blame my wife and tell them, 'Let's dive back in.' "I still feel a little disconnected, but I'm committed to focusing on their plan and analysis. Then someone knocks at the door—my coworker, saying that it's really important and will only take a minute. I step out and talk to her about another project that she needs me to make a decision on. It takes 3 or 4 minutes before I cut her short," Ed says.

At this point, it's clear how it all unraveled.

"I return and apologize yet again. Everyone says it's fine, but our momentum slows down more and gives us even less time to discuss. After talking with the team for another few minutes, I start worrying that we are not even close to finishing on time. Handling all the open issues seems like a lost battle, and I start worrying about my next meeting that was right afterward."

"So did you reschedule with the agency?" I asked, wondering if he had realized by that point there was no way to regain their focus or expect them to talk faster.

"No, I just started getting annoyed. I don't know why, but there was a growing tension in the meeting that wasn't there in the beginning."

"But did the agency people help sum up the findings and adjust to the circumstances?"

"No, not really," he says. "They understand how busy I am, but it took them 50 minutes to get to the point. There was too much buildup and no clear message. I know they're brilliant people, but it all got buried."

"Whose fault was it?"

"I am not sure who's to blame, but that tends to keep happening to me. And it's not getting any simpler or clearer. As the day rolls on, the loose ends just build to an overwhelming point," Ed sighs.

"But what if the agency people could have managed *you* better?"

"Me?" Ed looks surprised, and then reconsiders. "Maybe you're right. I was the one checking texts, getting interrupted," he says. "But they should have gotten to the point faster."

"Ed, your world is not getting simpler, and change is not going to stop," I explain in an attempt to make him feel a little better. "The calls, e-mails, texts, social media, and interruptions that require your constant attention are not going away anytime soon.

"The agency—or whoever needs your attention—has to adapt to and manage *you*, and be mindful that this is your life," I say. "The agency's brilliance was lost on you because the presenters

failed to find creative ways to cut to the chase and help you get and stay focused."

Who's Responsible for Adapting When the Message Is Not Being Heard?

What happened to Ed happens to executives every day. Who's at fault? Smart people present to busy people, who are constantly flooded with information, are regularly interrupted, are easily distracted, and often grow impatient.

When they don't get the clarity they need quickly, they check out. You've likely been in the same situation when you need to get someone like Ed's attention. You know you have terrific ideas to pitch and important information to share. So how do you get the other person to listen to it?

The modern, multitasking mind is a barrier—and brevity is the key to entry. When you think you have an hour and you wait to deliver the good stuff until the end, you're too late. You already lost your audience—whether it's 1 or 100—in the first few minutes. But if you capture their attention and manage it right away, none of these challenging circumstances will affect your presentation. You have to get to the point in 5 minutes, not 50.

A master of brevity says less and gets more done.

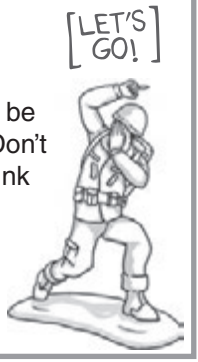
Timing Is of the Essence

It would be a mistake to approach brevity simply from the point of view of time. But a media trainer in New York put it to me this way: "Being brief is not just about time. What's more important is how *long it feels* to the audience."

[brief] BITS

Brevity is not just about time.

There is no magic amount of time—word counts, stopwatches, or otherwise—that defines brevity. To be brief is to create a compact quality of expression. Don't be in a rush to say a lot of words quickly. Always think about how to say more with less.



So don't be fooled by a narrow "time is short" view. It's not about using the least amount of time. It's about making the most of the time you have.

BRIEF Balance: The Harmony of Clear, Concise, and Compelling

Not everyone wants people to be brief. Tim McGuire is president of National Merit Scholarship Corporation, the organization that awards $50 million in grants every year to an elite group of about 10,000 high school seniors.

"There's a ton of detail when you're dealing with a brand new group of over 1.5 million individuals every year," McGuire said. "And we have conversations every year with geniuses who were on the cutting room floor because of the limited funding."

The competition is fierce and every application produces scores of candidates that all look practically the same.

"It's like splitting hairs," he said.

McGuire and National Merit need finalists to expound on their credentials, not trim them, to help break the deadlock.

Cutting out too much detail can actually kill an applicant's chances of getting the scholarship.

Even though potential merit scholars need to divulge lots of details about their achievements, they still need to adhere to the principles of brevity. It's a balancing act of being concise, clear, and compelling. All three need to be in harmony.

Take applicants who need to explain more about their background and extenuating circumstances in one of their final interviews. They need to be clear but cannot let themselves ramble on about a project to oversell their strengths; they still need to be compelling and concise. The interviewer needs to see that the applicants can paint a picture that sets them apart.

To be brief doesn't just mean being concise. Your responsibility is to balance how long it takes to convey a message well enough to cause a person to act on it. That's the harmony of brevity when it's striking the right chords.

A BRIEF Timeout

Let's take a final moment before diving into the book to clarify the kind of brevity we're discussing. There's a tendency to think brevity is pushing for less and runs the risk of being superficial and lacking substance.

Bernie Trilling, Founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of *21st Century Learning Advisors* and coauthor of *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*, coined the terms *light brevity* and *deep brevity* to make this important distinction.

"Light brevity is being concise without comprehension," Trilling said. "Deep brevity is being succinct with savvy."

Brevity starts with deep expertise. Only with thorough knowledge can you accurately make a summary.

"You have to go deep first and be confused for a while," he said. "Then come back up with clarity from a deeper perspective and in that clarity you can be brief."

Being brief can demonstrate how you've gone through that learning experience.

"It's perspective that must come out of deep work," he said. "You've got to give the essence of it. You can't give the whole thing because your audience would have to do the same amount of probing and work."

The road to brevity, then, requires hard work and lots of time. Doing all the digging and analysis on your own time saves the members of your audience from doing the labor themselves.

Timeout is over. Game on.

Long story, short. Executives are busy and your rambling presentations get lost in their daily flood of information.

2 Mindful of Mind-filled-ness

Long story, short. Today's fast-paced world of information, inattention, interruptions, and impatience requires you to make your point *before* your audience gets distracted.

Brevity Is Like an Instant Stress Release

An executive coach once said to me, "You'd be hard-pressed to find a businessperson say at the end of the day, 'I have some extra mental capacity to handle more.'"

You work around people who are mentally stretched. When you are succinct, you instantly make their life easier. And they remember and are grateful to you for that.

The source of that stress? Executives suffer growing pressure from:

1. *Information inundation*: an unending flood of words, images, sounds, and social media
2. *Inattention*: an inability to stay focused on one item for more than 10 seconds

3. *Interruptions*: a steady stream of problems competing for time and consideration
4. *Impatience*: a growing intolerance for results

This is your world—mine too. And it's only getting worse.

Battling Overcapacity

People can think clearly when they are safe on land. When they are drowning, however, there is only one thing on their mind: finding a life preserver. The new brutal reality is that people are drowning in information. It floods them everywhere they go.

Executives today wake up in the morning and immediately grab their smartphones to check texts, e-mail, updates, sports, stocks, and news. At breakfast, there are tweets and Facebook posts to read and repost. On the commute into the office, they make calls and send and receive a dozen e-mails, all the while trying to "relax" by listening to music.

They get to work to face meeting requests, more e-mails, funny YouTube videos, the company newsletter, and a few voicemails, and then they jump onto the corporate portal. And the day hasn't even started yet.

By the time you step into the picture, their attention is severely taxed. More e-mails, texts, meeting invitations, and pop-up reminders keep them checking their phones nonstop during your meeting.

And although you may get a head nod every once and a while, that doesn't mean you've broken through. They're just being nice.

You need to understand your enemies to defeat them. These four forces are constantly playing against you.

1. Information Inundation—The Water's Rising

"It's like trying to take a drink from a fire hose."

That is how one writer described today's world of information inundation.

An executive explained it to me this way: "I have two meetings per day. They both last an hour. In one group, it takes 50 minutes to get to the point," she said. "I may or may not have the mental stamina to last that long."

The other group gets to the point in the first 10 minutes. The remaining 50 minutes are spent in great conversation about the clarity that was produced in the first few minutes.

"The first group didn't have that sense of clarity and urgency. The second group did and got to the point right up front."

"Maybe they said similar things," she said. "At the end of the day, we really liked the second group and we didn't like the first one."

Software development company Atlassian reported that the average professional receives 304 e-mails per week.[1] According to Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers's annual Internet Trands report, people check their phones 150 times per day.[2]

[brief] BITS

Your audience is drowning, and brevity is their lifeline.

The Elements of Style is a masterpiece guide to good writing—all in less than 100 pages. In it, E. B. White describes Will Strunk's vision, "All through [the book] one finds the author's deep sympathy for the reader. Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write to drain this swamp quickly and get this man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope."

In a 2012 article in the *International Journal of Communication*, Roger Bohn and James Short of the University of California at San Diego reported that, "in 2008, Americans consumed about 1.3 trillion hours of information outside of work, an average of almost 12 hours per person per day."[3]

304
NUMBER OF EMAILS AN AVERAGE PROFESSIONAL RECEIVES PER WEEK

150
NUMBER OF TIMES AN AVERAGE PERSON CHECKS THEIR SMARTPHONE PER DAY

28
HOURS EACH WEEK THE AVERAGE PROFESSIONAL SPENDS ON EMAIL

And the same article reported that the average person consumed 100,500 words on an average day and that workers spent 28 hours a week writing and answering e-mails, searching for information, and collaborating internally.[4]

This pace will only increase. The Radicati Group reported in April 2013 that "the majority of e-mail traffic comes from business e-mails, which accounts for over 100 billion e-mails sent and received per day." Because e-mail is the main way people communicate in business, "This trend is expected to continue, and business e-mail will account for over 132 billion e-mails

85%
PERCENTAGE OF TIME A CEO SPENDS IN MEETINGS OR AT PUBLIC EVENTS

sent and received per day by the end of 2017."[5]

Time is even shorter if you are a CEO. The study "What do CEOs do?" revealed that "CEOs spend most of their time (85 percent) with other people. Meetings take up 60 percent of the working hours, and the remaining 25 percent is comprised of phone calls, conference calls, and public events."[6]

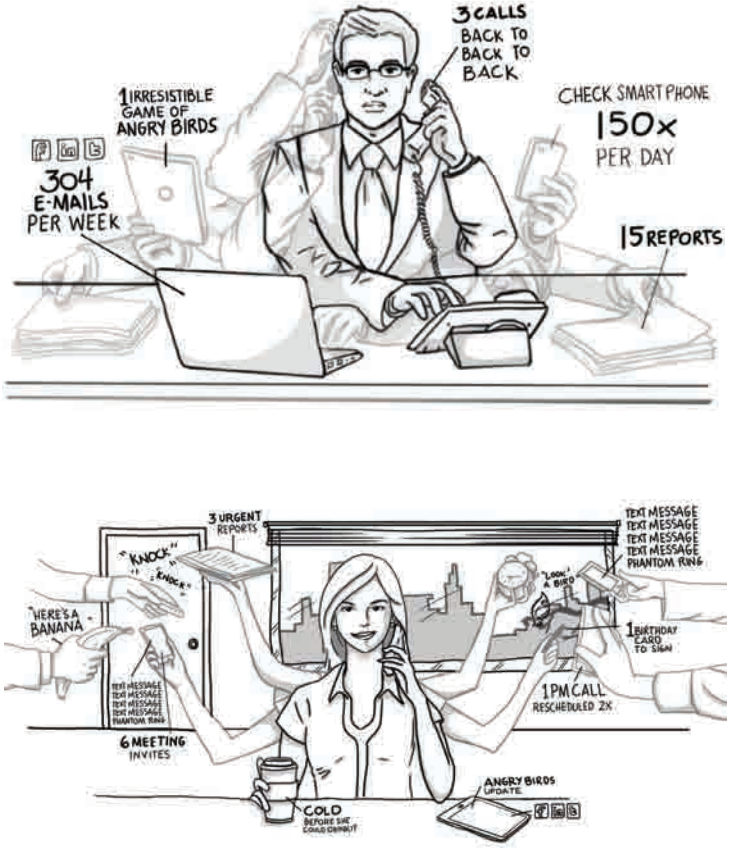
We are always connected—in our cars, at home, at work. Everything is a source of information. The implication is that your mastery of brevity—your ability to get to the point *quickly*—will make the difference between being heard or not—and your idea getting through or being dismissed.

2. Inattention—The Muscle Is Weakening

This information inundation is weakening people's ability to focus and prioritize. Prevailing research says that the average attention span is down to 8 seconds from 12 over the past five years.[7]

Being interrupted many times over a long period of time wears down your mental capacity, according to author David Rock. In his book *Your Brain at Work*, Rock writes, "Change focus 10 times an hour (one study showed people in offices did so as much as 20 times an hour), and your productive thinking time is only a fraction of what's possible. Less energy equals less capacity to understand, decide, recall, memorize, and inhibit. The result could be mistakes on important tasks."[8]

The life of a modern executive



► Busy professionals constantly face demands on their time and attention. They can't handle any more.

Executives from all levels constantly tell me they are exhausted by the end of the workday and feel as if they have attention-deficit disorder (ADD). Their attention spans seem jumpy and unfocused. In fact, some scientists believe that people who are "always on" and taking in information actually experience temporarily lowered IQs—and can experience a temporary drop of up to 10 IQ points.[9]

In addition, a group of Stanford University researchers studied frequent multitaskers and found that they have a more difficult time paying attention to the various forms of media they are exposed to than those who only occasionally multitask.[10] "When they're in situations where there are multiple sources of information coming from the external world or emerging out of memory, they're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their current goal," said associate professor and study author Anthony Wagner. "That failure to filter means they're slowed down by that irrelevant information."[11]

Think of attention span as a muscle. It begins to tire if we use it all day long in lots of different ways. People's attention is much stronger in the morning than in the afternoon. And if we treat all information equally, it increasingly affects our ability to hold our attention for a certain period of time.

3. Interruption—The Rate Is Alarming

Researchers say the average worker experiences one interruption every 8 minutes, or six to seven interruptions per hour. That equals 50 to 60 interruptions in an 8-hour day.

We're also interrupting ourselves. You've likely been working on a difficult task when something easier or more engaging

competes for your attention. Naturally, we feel like doing *that* instead. It's almost Pavlovian.

60
NUMBER OF TIMES A WORKER IS INTERRUPTED EACH DAY—ONCE EVERY 8 MINUTES

25
NUMBER OF MINUTES IT TAKES TO RETURN TO A TASK AFTER YOU'VE BEEN INTERRUPTED

$588B
AMOUNT THAT INTERRUPTIONS COST BUSINESSES EACH YEAR

For example, imagine I'm working in a quiet room on an important project, reading, writing, and developing deeper insights and analyses. Soon I'm thinking: "This is starting to get really hard. It'd be easier to check my phone." So I stop doing what I am doing.

Or maybe I am reading a colleague's e-mail that's a little too long and tough to follow. It's hard to concentrate, because the writer is not getting to the point. So I decide to put it aside for something less taxing, and I check the other messages or text someone.

Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, found that the average worker spent 11 minutes and 4 seconds on a task before being interrupted or interrupting himself or herself and switching to another task. Mark explains that once interrupted, it takes an average of 25 minutes for a worker to return to the original task.[12]

In fact, an average worker loses 2.1 hours per day to "unimportant interruptions and distractions," according to a study by Basex. Interruptions come at a high cost to businesses—specifically, to the tune of $588 billion a year in lost revenue.[13]

E-mail is a big interrupter. A study in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* by Karen Renaud, Judith Ramsay, and Mario Hair report that "office workers who use computers … constantly stop what they're doing to read and

respond to incoming emails. It's not unusual for them to glance at their inbox 30–40 times an hour (though when asked how frequently they look, they'll give a much lower figure)."[14]

4. Impatience—The Ice Is Thinning

The conditions of today's workflow have prompted people to expect things to happen faster. For instance, if you're reading a magazine on a tablet, the typical way to change a page is to flick your finger. It's so easy. People are carrying volumes of information on a thin tablet and can navigate this information by barely lifting a finger.

When I want to read the *Wall Street Journal*, I just download it. I don't have to walk out of my house to get it. It downloads within seconds, and I am reading it on my couch with a cup of coffee made instantly by a Keurig machine. Yet I get easily frustrated if the page doesn't load fast enough.

We don't spend much time on any *one* task. What's the average time an American spends looking at a Web page? 56 seconds. How about watching a YouTube video? In 2010, it took only 3.95 minutes.[15]

Technology has created an unwritten expectation that things will just go faster. So if you fail to make your point with people as quickly as they'd like, they might lose patience.

This contributes to our impatience with everyday events like meetings—a place where executives spend much of their time. In the book *Meeting by Design*, author Michael Clargo reports that, "almost 50 percent of meetings fail to use people's time efficiently … we have twice as many meetings and they last twice as long as would be necessary if they were properly designed and run."[16]

Google's approach to this problem is to project the image of a 4-foot stopwatch on the wall that counts down the meeting's time so it cannot run over.[17] The sheer size of the clock reminds attendees just how precious each minute is. Time cannot slip through your fingers when the minute hand is as long as your arm.

What Does It All Mean?

If you're adding more information, interruption, time, or complexity to others' day, all you're doing is encouraging them to tune you out. And if you don't develop a heightened awareness of this issue, you're training people to block you out permanently.

These days, it's no longer possible to get by on the merit of your idea, title, or allotted time. You have to put it in a smaller package and make it easier to consume and digest. You must boil it down and get to the point quickly, or be forgotten.

Your New Reality: There's No Time for a Slow Buildup

That is the reality today. There's no time to build up to a big conclusion. To communicate effectively nowadays, you must be able to speak in headlines and grab someone's attention right away.

Take, for example, a senior vice president of corporate communications who was managing significant organizational changes. He had two CEOs inside of one year, an activist board of directors, and public issues of tremendous significance.

The nature of the senior VP's job was clearly changing, and he needed to adapt. The board of directors—as well as industry and

community leaders—were putting him under much more scrutiny and quickly growing impatient.

It was obvious in my conversations with him that the issue of strategic communications was on the front lines. More than ever in his career, he was running out of time and needed to create clarity, urgency, and context for people who didn't care to wade through mounds of detail. His key stakeholders all had questions and needed answers quickly.

Board members were very busy and had little patience. Their attention was divided between the issues of the senior VP's company and those of other companies they ran or advised. He explained that their knowledge was a mile wide and an inch deep.

"Anytime my staff tries to present to them, the board members are checking their smartphones during meetings, excusing themselves to take phone calls, or just looking at them with eyes glazed over," he complained. "I realized that my staff needed to hit the ground running and interact with them in a more succinct way, or our company would be seriously affected."

He continued, "As activist investors, they weren't interested in the slow build. We need to find a way to overcome their inattention, interruptions, and impatience—to communicate to them in a quick and concise way. It's our new standard and our new reality."

"How are you adapting," I asked, "considering this new standard of brevity comes with the realization that there is no longer the time or attention that we used to have?"

"My new world doesn't have time like it used to. We have to get to the point faster—because these key people will make decisions for us if we don't do it," he said.

[brief] BITS

Successful people demand brevity and don't tolerate it when it's missing.

Busy people quickly lose patience when their peers and subordinates cannot get to the point. If you're buried under hundreds of e-mails and are in meetings all day, you don't have the time to waste on people droning on.

In their world—and likely yours as well—brevity is the new unspoken expectation.

Test Yourself

Where can you begin to get through to your audience more effectively?

Following are a few questions you can use to assess your mastery of this critical skill. Take a moment to think about how well you and your organization do some or all of the following things:

Examination of Brevity

1. Can I hear an hour's worth of complex information and summarize it in a 2-minute debrief?
2. Do I write e-mails that get to the point in five lines or less?
3. Do my PowerPoint presentations contain fewer than 10 slides, with plenty of images and little text?
4. Can I translate complicated ideas into a simple story, analogy, or anecdote?
5. Can I expertly deliver headlines like a reporter?

6. Do I speak clearly and concisely—in plain English rather than confusing corporate speech or jargon?
7. Do I know instantly when I've "lost" somebody?

In the coming chapters, we will examine how to master these skills and when to use them.

A New Professional Standard

Get ready—it's a whole new world. If you are used to preparing a seven-course meal, get ready to serve tapas. You and your company are going to stand out and get people's attention. You are going to be remembered and your ideas are going to be sticky. Everyone else will get left behind. Now is the time to turn the negative force of our attention economy on its head. Lean communication is your new advantage.

Long story, short. Today's fast-paced world of information, inattention, interruptions, and impatience requires you to make your point *before* your audience gets distracted.