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A Rep's View of Email Overload

I strongly believe that one of the world's greatest tools has, in some ways, turned into a travesty. The majority of emails are a farce of BS and foolishness. Spam filters do not protect us from ridiculous jokes, foolish political attacks and lewd and lascivious cartoons. Okay, some are funny, but clearly they are excessive and hinder the process of doing business. And by the way, who in the hell is sending me dozens of emails in hieroglyphics?

Admittedly, emails are cheaper and faster than letters, less intrusive than phone calls and less hassle than outdated faxes. Emailing eliminates time zone issues and makes communicating easier and less troublesome. So that's the good. How about the bad and the ugly?

The Bad and the Ugly

The bad is the emails are obsolescing postal worker's jobs at a critical time in our economy when unemployment is reported to be 9.8%, but unofficially 17%. You know who has to pay for their unemployment compensation and fabulous health insurance benefits. Enough of that, it's a blessing that 73% of our population sends emails and does their daily dose of internet surfing. Yes, it does drive our computer and PDA industries, but mostly in China (hardware) and India (software). More "bad" is the fact that email traffic is responsible for a huge percentage of identity theft, at least in my opinion.

Email Shields

Many of us have found that emails have enabled some people to become hardened and vicious. Things that they would never say to your face are expressed in terse, mean and hurtful ways. Conversely, hand written letters typically reflect etiquette. Emails are often void of human element, and I call that netiquette.

What Makes Emails Different

Email does not convey emotion nearly as well as face-to-face dialogue or even a telephone conversation. It's lacks vocal inflection and body language. Your correspondence may not clearly indicate if you are kidding or serious, happy or sad, frustrated or euphoric. Most importantly, sarcasm is particularly dangerous in emails. Remember, whatever you email can be shared with scores of people, and countless mailing lists in microseconds. Another danger of email is that it tends to be verbally sloppier than a hand written communication on paper.

Email Facts

Here are some frightening 2008 email statistics:
• 183 billion emails are sent each day.
• 2 million emails are sent each second.
• 72% of all email might be spam or viruses.
• This writer receives an average of 70 spam emails per day.
• There are 1.3 billion email users getting the same crap as us reps, distys and suppliers.

Efficient Email Hints

• Send separate emails for each topic so the recipient can save in the appropriate folder and can find it easily.
• The message should only be addressed to those people from whom you expect any response.
• It should be understood that other recipients that are "copied" are receiving the information only as an "FYI".
• Do not reply to an email and choose "reply to all".
• Be precise and brief. The recipient of a long, complex email is likely to drag out a response or failure to reply. Complex situations are much better served via a phone call.
• Send attachments to recipients only when they really need to read them.
• "Thank you" messages are typically not necessary when communicating internally, they are nothing but mailbox stuffers.
• Activate the "Out of Office" when you are away for 1 or more days. If you have a Blackberry, there is no need to activate "Out of Office" unless you are on vacation or any other longer absence.
• Use the telephone to speak with your colleagues if it is likely that they will have an answer right away

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N.Y. Times Article

Last April, the New York Times published an article entitled "Struggling to Evade the E-Mail Tsunami." It depicted an executive that had 2,433 unread emails in his in-box, another 720 awaiting his attention in Facebook. It didn't reference Twitter, but I venture to say he also had hundreds of Tweets. No wonder that the legend of my delete key has vanished. I'm also convinced that there should be an "unsubscribe" key on my keyboard. I keep unsubscribing, but for every one that I remove, several more seem to hatch. The N.Y. Times had a simple solution for busy executives to manage emails, it's called a secretary!

Forbes Article

Last October, Forbes Magazine stated that email overload is the leading cause of preventable productivity loss in organizations today. Basex Research recently estimated that businesses lose $650 billion annually in productivity due to unnecessary email interruptions. And the average number of corporate emails sent and received per person per day is expected to reach over 228 by 2010.

The fundamental problem of this otherwise great technology is largely behavioral, and new practices and technologies are arising to solve it.

A major contributor to email overload is broken business processes. When an environment changes, business processes fail to adapt, and this causes exceptions. For example, when a customer requests information that isn't provided by a standard support process, it can kick off a chain of emails hunting for information – and what is found isn't easily captured into the redesign of the process.

The Personal Touch

The personal touch is sorely missed in email communications, especially when it involves large companies. The growing earmark of top performers is personal communication by voice, or better yet, face-to-face. How novel! One answer from a time-management specialist is to keep your email software off except for twice-a-day checks. Yeah sure, that's easier said than done in today's world. Someday your computer may explode from email constipation.

Summary

Overfull email inboxes and a constant flood of unmanageable emails are facts of business life that nearly everyone faces. One is often tempted to file for "email bankruptcy" – click the delete inbox button and end it all. Most strategies around dealing with this email deluge relate to getting more power out of the email solution – greater storage, more intelligent spam filters, more powerful search – or better "management" of the email torrent – time budgeting, organization of mails etc.

If the email deluge is a problem, then we're part of the problem. We are not using email for what it was meant, or why it was designed. It is from this that the problem of email chaos stems, as does the problem of constant distraction and productivity-sapping email interruptions. Perhaps, email is actually working against us.

To summarize, email is a double-edged sword. At the same time, it both enhances communications and chews up valuable time. But one thing for sure, it is a monumentally addictive aspect of cyberspace.

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