

Last updated: 16:00 (GMT+04) Wednesday, July 23, 2008. Rajab 20, 1429.

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## Email-related stress in the workplace is a growing problem

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
Published: April 01, 2008, 00:41

A few months ago, I singled-out emails as a growing workplace stressor, especially in the way they set up a permanent air of emergency.

Now a study by two UK universities (Glasgow and Paisley) reports that 30 per cent of workers feel actively stressed by the need to monitor and respond to emails, and only about the same number feel unaffected by it.

This confirms the status of email-related stress management as a specific agenda of its own, which ought to be high in the priorities of both IT and HR personnel.

One example of a joint-response by these two departments is the Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). This is basically an internet Code of Conduct for employees, aimed at preventing activities that are either illegal, disruptive or a threat to security, and also takes in corporate rules of appropriate dialogue online, sometimes called 'Netiquette'.

But this can be usefully dovetailed with IT by the blocking of Facebook, YouTube or those endless special offers that may distract people from their work, in addition to the main IT agenda of Content Filtering to block spam and restrict emails to work-related items only.

Like all sweeping regulations, this could be accused of penalising the responsible majority in order to control the mischievous few, and it may be claimed that the requirement to concentrate 100 per cent on work throughout the day is unnatural. Literally, you wouldn't be able to send a short email to your wife at any time. Might this Big Brother intervention actually be causing more stress than it relieves?

Fortunately, the technology incorporates many features that can counteract email-related stress. That 'air of emergency' I referred to earlier, causing some people to check their messages up to 40 times an hour, is often rooted in anxiety that some important work emails may have been wrongly blocked.

Multiple-layer filtering enables 'Whitelisting' of trusted email senders' addresses to ensure delivery. Also the technology is flexible enough to allow local rules at the discretion of management. You can allocate time and bandwidth quotas to each user, enabling access to leisure sites at particular hours. Another way round the problem is to

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block specific sites on the main network but provide free access on machines in the coffee area.

This reminds us that today's workplace is a part-social arena, where most employees can and should be trusted to keep a sensible balance between working and socialising - a stress reduction factor in itself.

And if we can wean people away from checking the mail 40 times an hour (setting up a harmful syndrome called 'false positive anxiety'), and seeing why a two-hourly check is usually quite adequate, we will have helped to encourage a more sensible and practical use of that unwieldy and imperfectly understood instrument, the Net.

#### Key points: Handling IT-related stress

- Nearly a third of workers feel actively stressed by email demands
- Content Filtering Technology can selectively block messages
- Ideally, allow social emailing in the recreational zone of the office

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' of experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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