

## The inefficient electronic office

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Twice before, this column has singled out e-mail as a factor in excessive workplace pressure - once on grounds of inefficient time management, and secondly, because of the reported stress-effects of having to read through yet another list of e-mails delivered throughout the day.

A new report on e-mail mis-management has confirmed these opinions, along with some worrying findings based on the most thorough research ever conducted on the subject.

It reveals that the average employee wastes about one hour each day through the inefficient handling of e-mail. Some of the country's most sophisticated managements have put a ban on the 'CC' (copying-in) facility, while some organisations have even banned their employees from using e-mail altogether. This highlights the dawning recognition that ever-increasing data transmission overwhelms limited attention resources, and it identifies e-mail as the prime source of wasted time and inefficiency, thereby reversing the common assumption that the electronic office is super-efficient.

The study carries high credibility - commissioned by a leading UK communications consultancy, and based on a survey of nearly 4,000 people working in 150 businesses over an 18-month period. Among other statistics, the average inbox contains an incredible 2,769 e-mails: nearly 40 per cent of people spend two hours a day on their e-mail whilst only a third of e-mails are originated by the sender; the rest are replies, copies or forwards. Its over-riding conclusion is that we have become conditioned to process e-mails without thinking, and that people need training in the correct use of computerised mail to avoid the anxiety and stress that is now endemic in handling this often unwanted and unnecessary burden

The consultancy behind the report is proposing a Global e-mail Charter that would encourage a new kind of e-mail culture, where professionalism touches hands with good manners. Some of my suggested principles would be these:

- I will first ask myself whether this e-mail is necessary
- I will make it clear what reply I expect, if any
- I will include all required information including contact details
- I will only send e-mails to those that need to read it

As many of us have noticed, the speed and immediacy of e-mails has led to sloppy often ambiguous dialogue. Repeated examples of this can impact unfavourably on the image of the organisation and on its objectives. E-mailed information needs to be accurate and facts need to be communicated without error - if they need to be communicated at all.

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