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Cutting through email overload

The biggest challenge is to step away from the popular assumption that email is the new, improved version of all that old-fashioned telephoning and face-to-face dialogue

By Carole Spiers Special to Gulf News
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It's that topic again. And no apologies are offered for checking the latest wisdom about the ever-increasing problem of email overload.

My own reflections on it in this column have dealt with the pressure of 24/7 access, the inefficient time-management that goes with it, and how to deal with vexatious abuses of the system. But these only scratch the surface of the problem.

This week I just started work with a full-time specialist in 'Information Overload', and it is incredible to think that this branch of workplace stress has now spawned a mini-profession dedicated to it.

My colleague explained his latest conclusions about the types of policies that management should adopt towards email.

The biggest challenge is to step away from the popular assumption that email is the new, improved version of all that old-fashioned telephoning and face-to-face dialogue.

Limitations

Email has its function, and it is a fairly restricted one, properly defined as 'a method of notification' that is, conveying pure information without any emotive charge. It is not a debating platform, and it soon shows its limitations when people try to use it as a channel either for in-depth reporting, exchanging opinions, negotiation or serious discussion, when that instant-reply button (especially on the Blackberry) can generate a plethora of unnecessary comment.

If our new expert is right, it means that management must persuade employees to remind themselves of the merits of more traditional forms of contact, and insist on face-to-face meetings as the first resort for internal communication. This seems to me to call into question the advantages of the virtual office, whose benefits have been widely endorsed to the exclusion of its drawbacks. Establishing the proper role of email will divert a lot of needless traffic. Other sensible house-rules include the discontinuing of certain email functions that people feel they ought to use, just because they're there.

An obvious one is 'red-flagging' a classic case of the so-called 'urgent' getting in the way of the 'important'. Another is reply-to-all, which appears to be very helpful, but is actually self-proliferating to a pointless degree.

So much for management policies about email overload. But what about employees' personal email habits? My colleague has itemised the following five points of good practice:

Restrict your email activity: Designate time for emails, or they'll dominate your working day.
Actively delete or file: Keep your inbox for messages requiring action. Don't hesitate to delete.
Keep the whole of your inbox in view: If you can't see the bottom of the box, edit down to the point where you can — usually about thirty messages.
Turn off new-mail indicators: Don't be distracted by 'flags'. If it's really urgent, they will telephone
Be ready to exit email altogether: When you're concentrating on a problem, log-off and go off-line!

The author is a BBC guest-broadcaster and Motivational Speaker. She is CEO of an international stress management and employee wellbeing consultancy based in London. Contact them for proven stress strategies - www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk