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How not to get lost in your mails

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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A curious feature of today's business life is that the 'emergency-crisis' atmosphere has now taken over as the norm. You spend most of the day not only working at the computer, but poised on high alert, ready to put out those instant 'brushfires' that suddenly erupt - in other words, handling your e-mail, or more accurately, being handled by it.

This column last week highlighted an important difference between two kinds of working time - the constructive kind where you control the operation, and the disruptive kind where you are forced to break-off and respond to interruptions. Anyone who has studied time management would immediately identify e-mail as a major cause of the second one.

It's easy to see the effect on performance. Any one responsible for analysing a problem is going to spend all day being distracted from it, unable to dig down properly into the subject. There is no such thing as a solid hour - only sixty lots of one-minute panics, liable to keep the mind in an entirely superficial mode.

The first part of the solution is to defuse the 'hurry-hurry' impact of that 'new e-mail' alert which is undoubtedly very hard to resist. After all, it could be anything. But keeping the alert switched-on is the equivalent of never leaving the house in case an important letter arrives. Perhaps once in five hundred, you're going to miss something. Simply arrange to check your e-mails at a sensible interval - every couple of hours is quite adequate. Try it for a week or two, and see how many real emergencies blew up during your short absences. Not many.

Next, you need to follow some basic drills for keeping your inbox manageable. Delete irrelevant messages at once. File others in suitable folders for later reference. And try to observe some rules that speed up two-way communication. Use the subject line to distinguish FYI (For Your Information) from RES, which is a requested answer. Cooperate with the addressee by reducing elements which don't strictly need an attached file, or compressing larger ones to reduce the overall size of the e-mail.

Finally, managers should try to keep their whole department 'e-mail-savvy', as an essential business requirement. How to set up an efficient archive... Integrating e-mails with electronic calendars... Reporting spam to your internet service provider... These may seem like minor issues, but all put

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together, they significantly speed and streamline the conduct of daily business.

You may rate e-mail management important enough to warrant an external training course. More likely, you'll settle for in-house seminars, either with a consultant trainer or one of your HR people.





As well as improving performance, these interventions will also put you confidently in command of your e-mail programme, and eliminate unnecessary worry and artificial pressure.

Key points: E-mail routines

- Resist the temptation to treat that 'new e-mail' alert as a crisis.
- Acquire the simple drills that keep your inbox manageable.
- E-mail management should be treated as formal business training.

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.

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