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Email Overload

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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I WROTE LAST week about effective time-management, and in particular the importance of minimising the disruption caused by constant interruptions to our working day.

 Email is now one of the greatest sources of interruption in the business world - with the result that if you're going to manage your time effectively, then managing your emails will need to be a priority.

Because I regularly travel around the world, I was advised to purchase a mobile phone with the facility to handle email. Initially, I thought this was unnecessary but, as time has gone by, I now find I would be totally lost without being able to handle my email on the move.

When I've finished a meeting and am sitting in my taxi on the way to my next appointment, I just sit back and answer my emails. This saves me literally hours of time, and people are invariably impressed with the speed of my response! (However, the downside of this is that everyone now expects an immediate reply!)

Sometimes, it is hard to appreciate that email was meant to make our lives easier when, in fact, many of us are continually stressed-out by the size of our daily inboxes and 'spam'. If we also take into account text messages and mobile phones, we find we are expected to be on call 24/7 - even when we are on a holiday or out of the country!

The tidal wave

The ideal would be to tackle email overload at its source - by preventing unwanted emails from arriving in the first place.

Most email programs have a filter facility to separate 'spam' from genuine mail, although some can direct emails to the wrong mailbox. It's important therefore to check your junk mail folder as regularly as your inbox to make sure that 'junk' emails really are unwanted before deleting them - otherwise you can miss important messages and end-up simply adding to your problems.

Research suggests that many people are starting work earlier simply to deal with the amount of email that they have to deal with. I know executives who come into work an hour earlier and work an hour later!

It is not unknown for some people to receive hundreds of emails every day - most of it from unknown sellers of products and services - all of which has to be scrutinised before deleting. All very frustrating!

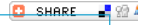
If this is happening to you, here are 12 simple rules to help you manage your email the same way you manage your time. Being organised is the key to good email management!

1. Set aside specific times to deal with your email.
2. Set-up filters for unwanted emails. Don't reply to unsolicited email as this can confirm to the sender that your address is 'active'.
3. Structure your mailbox by using folders to keep your messages properly organised. I use different coloured flags for each category of work that I manage, which is one of the most valuable tools I have used.
4. Have separate mailboxes for urgent and non-urgent mail and for personal correspondence.
5. Be careful to flag up everything you have read. It's very easy to read an email and THINK you have responded although, in fact, you haven't. This can be a problem if the recipient asks if you have replied and you wrongly confirm you have done so!
6. Before sending any email, think whether it is the most appropriate medium for your message and do you really need to send one? Many people have decided that phoning or walking over to see a colleague is more effective than emailing them.
7. Make the purpose of your email clear. Always put relevant information in the subject line so the recipient will know the subject matter.
8. Use short words and sentences and check your attachments before sending. Many are unnecessary and could just as easily be included within the message itself. Don't forget that many people will not open attachments.
9. Show consideration to the recipient by allowing time for a response. Expecting one immediately is unreasonable although email responses are often expected within 24 hours of your receipt.
10. Never send an email when you're tired or angry. You will regret it once you've pressed the button - but it will then be too late! And don't forget that emails can remain a long time on a server somewhere - maybe for years!
11. Always check the addressee(s). You can cause considerable upset by emailing the wrong person!
12. Never open emails with attachments from people you don't know - they may contain spyware or viruses.

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And most importantly, back-up your email daily and don't ever rely on your computer not 'crashing'. One day it will fail and valuable messages will be lost. That will most certainly add to your stress levels.



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Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organisational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular motivational speaker at UAE conferences. Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, is welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae. Website: www.carolespiersgroup.com