

# To: ALL USERS.

# Copy: ALL USERS.



By Carl Evans and Warren Wright

**D**o you dread going into work after a holiday because you know that first day back will consist of wading through the 200 plus emails sent to you while you have been away? Do you receive emails from colleagues whose office is only next door, or along the same corridor? Do you get caught in exchanges between colleagues trying to arrange a mutually convenient meeting (can't do Tuesday at 10am, how about 2pm, can't do 2pm, how about Wednesday at 11am, can't do Wednesday, how about.....)? Do you receive emails from external suppliers notifying you of the month's special offers, only to receive a further email from a senior manager bringing to your attention the special offers from the same supplier? Do you receive emails thanking you for sending previous communications? Do you automatically get copied into emails that seemingly add little value to your job?

Managers are increasingly facing the burden of email overload. It is not just the time taken to read them, but there is a compulsion to respond and take actions relating to an email in case it is forgotten, which not only robs time from the manager, but distracts from more priority activities.

Nonetheless, there are undeniable advantages to communicating by email. For those teleworking, it is a primary means of keeping in touch with head office. However, it is the speed of production and transmission that makes emails so attractive, and that a permanent record of the communication can be retained. Similarly, to receive an immediate response, ensuring understanding or compliance of the recipient offers managers reassurance, as does the facility to check a recipient has received/opened an email. To issue a communication to all members of a department or organisation would be time-consuming and costly without emails. Moreover, the ability to attach documents and thereby save on printing and posting is another key factor.

However, when emails are sent almost automatically, without initially considering whether they should be sent or not, or whether other means of communication would be more effective, then problems start to occur. An approach of send and forget transfers the burden or responsibility on to others to action. There is also an element of covering oneself for

future reference or just-in-case by sending an email, justifying positions, covering tracks, showing to others in the organisation we are doing something about an issue. Furthermore, there is the problem of duplication, with email communications from various sources.

Consequently, there is now an urgent need to establish effective email practices and protocols to improve managers' working lives. Actions can therefore be categorised into three spheres: Organisational wide; through the use of technology; and individual managers.

#### Organisational wide

Here we are seeking a cultural shift that will discourage the predominant use of email communication in the business. Senior management should encourage greater emphasis on face-to-face or telephone communications, constantly reminding staff to use email only after careful consideration.

The organisation should issue guidelines for emails; advising staff that a typical letter writing style (eg, Dear Julie, hope this email finds you well..) is to be avoided, to cut down on reading time. Similarly, there should be no need to send a further email thanking staff for information sent in a previous email. The use of accepted abbreviations (eg, FYI) is to be endorsed.

More progressive actions could involve enforced email holidays – days when email communication is prohibited. This however, should not result in messages being saved until the day after and thus flooding the system. The organisation could consider internally charging departments for emails. For example, if a charge of 5 pence per email/per recipient is adopted, an individual emailing all 1000 employees (via all users), incurs a charge of £50 against their department's budget.

#### Through the use of technology

Help is at hand through the controlled use of the standard facilities available in most email systems. Many of us are inundated with so called SPAM email, ie the virtual equivalent of junk mail, ranging from offers on office supplies to dubious international investment opportunities.

SPAM is at best annoying, but it can also provide a medium to infect the PC of an unsuspecting user with potentially damaging viruses. Therefore, a number of email systems provide SPAM filters which can automatically redirect or even delete suspected SPAM emails. There are different levels of protection depending upon the number and type of SPAM emails you may receive. The criteria for detecting SPAM may also vary. Some filters reject emails with unfamiliar addresses, others monitor the number of recipients, with the justification that SPAM is likely to be targeted to large numbers of people. On the whole, SPAM filters work well, but will not detect all unwanted emails. New methods of avoiding automatic detection are being developed daily. Also, bear in mind SPAM filters may also reject emails that are perfectly acceptable to you without you being aware of their existence.

Distribution lists are commonplace in email systems and provide a convenient way of emailing a number of people with a common interest. However, the next time you use a distribution list, ask yourself this, "Does everyone on the list need to receive this email?" Try to re-structure distribution lists to include sub-groups (eg, if a department contains three distinct divisions then create a distribution list for each division). As distribution lists can contain other lists, the list for the department can simply contain the lists for the three divisions.

Arranging meetings can be a tiresome process by email and alternatives have been suggested above. However, many email systems are accompanied by e-diary or calendar facilities.

E-diaries are basically the PC equivalent of your standard desk diary, allowing appointments and meetings to be booked and recalled. However, the main advantage is in sharing. E-diary facilities allow you to share the contents of your diary with whoever you choose, therefore instantly providing information on when you are free. When a group of staff share diaries, the advantages can be even more apparent. Specific searches can be initiated to seek time-slots when all/most of the staff are free to meet. You will, however, have to be aware of possible staff resistance. Some staff may see shared e-diaries as a 'big-brother' management tactic to observe staff activities (or lack of them).

Many email systems allow 'rules' to be created to manage various activities including handling incoming email. 'Rules' act a little like SPAM filters in which incoming emails can be redirected to other folders (ie, not the Inbox), forwarded to other email accounts or, more drastically, deleted.

The main difference is that you define the criteria by which the emails are filtered. For example, you may wish all correspondence from a specific individual to be forwarded to management, or place all emails in a designated folder where the 'subject' contains a key word or phrase. A certain amount of discipline and structure is needed to define useful and appropriate 'rules'. Rules should not be used to simply avoid or even defer reading emails.

Dealing with replies is another area of potential inefficiencies. The much maligned 'Reply to All' facility should be treated with the same respect as Distribution Lists. Does everyone who received the original email need to hear your reply? In fact the misuse of this simple function has been the source of many email embarrassments. When sending an email, it is also possible

to have the reply automatically sent to another email address, thus avoiding dealing with replies yourself. However, bear in mind someone will have to.

Another email feature that is perhaps overused is automatically tracking to see if an email has been delivered/opened. The reason for this is to ensure that important emails are read, and to have a permanent record of this. However, what this means is that you will receive an additional email/notification for every person that received an email from you. Some systems will also inform the recipient that tracking has been requested and prompt them to choose whether a notification should be returned.

This additional work means that automatic tracking should be used sparingly. Ask yourself how often you actually need to receive confirmation that an email has been read. If it is important that an instruction is carried out or some information is received, then perhaps an alternative communication method, eg, a telephone call, may be more appropriate.

Email systems are becoming increasingly more sophisticated and there is a temptation to 'try out' new facilities. However, try to ensure that any features adopted reduce, rather than increase, your (and your co-workers) interaction with email.

#### The individual manager

Before sending an email, consider alternative methods of communication: face-to-face, telephone, written memorandum or letter. In this way, email becomes the communication of the last resort. Encourage the same approach among staff.

Use effective time management skills – block in times of the day for reading emails, and then diarise time follow-up actions.

Perhaps the first action you could undertake is a communication audit. How many emails do you send/receive in a day? What percentage of incoming emails do you immediately delete without reading/upon reading? What percentage of emails actually add value to your job? What percentage of other methods of communication do you use over a working week? These basic questions could highlight potential issues regarding the problems of email overload.

We would be interested to hear members' views on this topic. If you have any comments, or have adopted other approaches either as a manager, or in your organisation, please contact us on: [w.wright@worc.ac.uk](mailto:w.wright@worc.ac.uk) or [c.evans@worc.ac.uk](mailto:c.evans@worc.ac.uk).

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