

## Is Email in Crisis?

**How do you feel about email?** There are over 3 billion email accounts in the world and in excess of 100 trillion emails sent every year. Email has revolutionised business communications by increasing the ease and speed at which individuals and organisations can interact with each other – but poor discipline, bad practices and a lack of agreed conventions seem to outweigh the undoubted benefits – to the extent that email is now recognised as being one of the main causes of work-related stress and is amongst the top 10 causes of stress in general.

10 years ago, Department of Trade and Industry figures showed that in the UK, people were spending an average of 49 minutes per day working with emails – limited observation suggests that as each year passes, these figures are likely to have grown exponentially! How much time do you spend on email every day? Is it time to do something about it?

It is not uncommon for some people to receive in excess of 200 emails per day and while many of these are unsolicited, a great proportion are a response to the willingness with which many of us press the **Send** button in the first place. This volume of email is simply unsustainable, requiring a time investment of between 5 and 20 hours a week, just clearing the Inbox!

### Email – The Great Interrupter?

In line with other distracters, (the phone, drop in visitors and the like...) it can take between one and four minutes to regain concentration after reading an email. In the US, where the average worker checks emails and swaps windows on their computer an *average of 37 times every hour*, the logic says that many people are spending in the region of 2/3 of their time in a distracted state!

### Email – Love it or hate it?

People complain about email – but feel the need to be ‘in touch’, responding quickly to messages and inadvertently reinforcing the idea that email is an instant tool and that they are available 24/7. When you next attend a meeting, just notice how your colleagues use the break – they reach for their phones... of course it’s not just email they are checking, but SMS and social media sites as well.

**Why are we so addicted to checking messages?** At a simple level we can convince ourselves that any message alert needs to be checked, because it ‘might be important’ and of course it is not until we open our messages that we find out that it isn’t!

We get a buzz of excitement when a message arrives – the brain is hit with a shot of dopamine, after which we may feel flat and bored... until the next message comes along to give another chemical infusion of enthusiasm!



### Are you an email dinosaur?

Even as some people are beginning to think about how they can better manage their email, younger people are increasingly ignoring it, adopting other emerging, more vibrant tools instead.

Recent reports show a near 60% decrease in the comparative use of

email services by 12-18 year olds; a nearly 20% decrease in the 25-35 year age range and close to 10% decrease amongst 35-45 year olds!

This does not mean that these groups are communicating any less, rather that they are choosing more immediate alternatives – Instant Messaging, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in and Skype.

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**What is your organisation's email strategy?** Some businesses, reflecting the clear preference of employees under 30 and in recognition of the unsustainability of the volume of emails an average employee is expected to process, intend to end the use of internal emails. Instead, they will use Instant Messaging (IM) and champion the old favourite, talking face-to-face with their colleagues. Externally, their staff will still use email, because unlike the vast array of social networks and IM services, (which all require different accounts and their own software) email is fundamentally compatible – which is the overriding reason why, in the short term, it will survive.

**If your organisation isn't addressing its strategy around email and IM, then at least make the tools YOU use work for YOU.**

Recognise that email is **not** the best tool for communication which requires an immediate response – much better to talk face-to-face, to use the phone or even to send an SMS message. Look for other ways to manage and cut down the mails that you do receive:

- **Decide when YOU want to be disturbed** – Turn off all in-coming alerts (the vibrate option, as well as the 'ping'). These interrupters serve to distract from whatever else we should be doing and jump the queue in our priorities – relentlessly grabbing our attention like a badly behaved child! Take control – create focused chunks of time to concentrate on important, proactive tasks and then reward yourself by viewing your Inbox once you have completed the things you need to do.
- **Make it easy for people to know you are not always available** – Activate the **Automatic Reply** function (AKA 'Out of Office Message' in all Outlook versions before 2010) as frequently as possible – not just for trips away, but also to protect your 'prime time'. Tell people when you will next be available and what alternative action they can take, if their need is urgent.
- **Have a spring clean** – Cut down on excess 'noise', the emails you receive which are of low value and which you would normally look at quickly or skip over and which sink to the bottom of your Inbox unsorted or unread, because you cannot decide where to file them. Add unwanted senders to your junk mail, unsubscribe from lists and Delete as you go.
- **Get organised and prioritise** – Filter your email on **To: Cc: Sent by:** Create short-cuts from your email to key applications and files – use folders to store both Sent and Received mails.
- **Speed up the process** – Create standard replies and templates for things like directions to your office and use automatic signatures. Role model best practice – focus on creating concise answers and always pause before you press **Reply to All**.

For more ideas on effectiveness and handling email, why not look at the fully updated, **Second Edition of: *Time to Think — Seize Control of Your Time and Your Life*** by Mark Barnes (ISBN 978-1-85252-538-5)

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