



How to Reduce Incoming Email

CONTROLLING THE FIREHOSE OF EMAIL AT WORK INCREASES PRODUCTIVITY

Do you get a lot of email? Do you want to reduce how much email traffic you receive? Well, buried in this article is the simple secret answer in **three words**. See if you can find it.

Oh, you want me to get right to the point and tell you the answer? ["Ding!"] Hold please; my phone just said I have a message that has to be read.

Here you will not get information on the proper writing of email, and this might make the English majors and self-anointed grammar police crazy. They'll forcefully argue against this contemporary eroding of proper English in the name of brevity, complicated with technology that only allows brief tweets and single letters to mean whole words. But, it's that same technology at our fingertips 24/7 that allows our thoughts to instantly flow into tweets, and email to fly at the speed that our thoughts or experiences will allow it to happen.



FACTS

- #1 The average business user receives 19% irrelevant mail daily and spends 1:36 hours on non-company websites.
- #2 No one seems to have time to read long email, but we all seem to have the time to write email.
- #3 The need for validation tends to have people writing messages to CYA (cover your 'assets') documentation.
- #4 The fingers are in gear before the brain is engaged. We data-dump the moments we're having.
- #5 Most people won't remember whatever email, text or post they read one hour ago.
- #6 We assume that because it was sent, it was received AND/OR comprehended. Email communication gets lost in translation. 80% of communication is non-verbal. This doesn't mean it comes via electronic method; instead, it's all the subtle methods of voice, tone, body language, eye contact, etc.
- #7 Email is one-way communication. We think at approximately 800 words-per-minute, we talk at approximately 125 wpm, and generally type less than 65 wpm. It actually takes more time to achieve an end-result via email.

Do you have friends or colleagues who send you so much email, or Facebook posts, or Tweets that you have developed an auto-pilot reaction to ignore them, or always read everything they send? We have an internal instinct that when certain people send a message we know what to expect. Maybe you're one of those people. When you send messages you're creating an image and reputation for yourself that impacts your ability to be heard or influential.

What impact do you want to have when you're sending a message? "Wait!" You're thinking isn't the question supposed to be how to get everyone else to stop sending you email? You are also part of "everyone else." When you are deciding to send a message how quick do you go from thought to action?

HOW PEOPLE READ

We "data mine" the computer screen looking for highlights. Google has great research on the topic. The best web designers know how the human eye scans for data and the "hot spots" on the screen that gives them less than 0.2 seconds to capture your attention. Speed-readers look down the center of each page mining for highlights. Each morning the US President receives a state-of-affairs briefing that is summarized on one page. If he can do it, so can you.

REAL SITUATION – STOP TRYING

A client that I was coaching recently asked for advice on how to get his emails read by upper management. He is a brilliant man with a senior position at a mid-sized company. He had a lot of great business ideas that could significantly help achieve strategic objectives and grow the organization. But he was very frustrated that he felt ignored and ultimately disrespected. I gave him one simple suggestion that completely changed everything. He was suddenly experiencing responses to his messages, respect for his input, and seeing actions taken as a result of his ideas. What changed? *He stopped trying so hard and started by reducing the number of emails being sent.*

The one thing he wanted the most was the one thing he was harming the greatest. The more he tried to be heard, the more he was being ignored. He was creating a reputation for himself of someone who always bombards people with email messages and ideas. As the ideas flowed, his fingers typed. His most significant ideas were getting lost among all of his other ideas that he simultaneously presented.

The solution: He created structure. He wrote down all the ideas and held onto them until the end of the week. He emailed them to himself or saved a draft message and updated it throughout the week. Then, at the end of the week, decided which idea was the top most important one that should be sent. He was discovering that the idea he had on Monday was not as important on Friday. This structure flowed into his personal life. He stopped providing comments to a majority of emails he received. He wasn't getting distracted by posting regular Facebook updates.

End result: Instead of trying to change others, my client created his own self-development that raised his ability to be influential. He simultaneously reduced email and was getting more of his ideas through upper management.



TRY THIS GAME

Next time you're with someone at lunch or dinner, tell everyone to put their cell phones in a stack on the table. The first person to check their phone for any purpose has to pay the check. (Talk about a deterrent!) We create the world around us, and how people perceive us by our everyday actions. What have you done to self-observe the impact and influence that you have? Have you lost the ability to control what's happening around you?

WE'RE ALWAYS "ON"

The constant need we have to be activated is pervasive. Look around and see people together in public, but relating to their devices versus each other. Apps are constantly feeding us and getting us to respond. We have a primal drive to be attentive. It's why the negative news is more engaging than positive and commercials are intended to stimulate a response. It's also why we recommend not having any "activating" activities at least 30 minutes prior to bed, and thus no TV, computer, email, text, or phone in the bedroom. This technology stimulates us and we're compelled to respond.

ORGANIZATION CULTURE BY LEADERSHIP – THE STATISTICS

Regardless of your type of business, internal and external email volume impacts productivity. The average business user receives 78 email messages per day of which 19% are considered spam and 24% contain an attachment. If an employee is checking personal email via external websites, then this further reduces productivity. The average user spends 1.36 hours per day on external (i.e. not business related) websites, and spends 41 minutes per day on instant messaging. ¹

Leadership within an organization has a significant influence on the volume of email in the culture. Email overload is a symptom of a larger issue, such as ambiguous decision-making processes, lack of clear protocols, and people not getting what they need from peers. If your culture is to drop everything and regularly check email, or you feel compelled to "CYA" (cover your 'assets') then your leadership team has the opportunity to reshape the culture. Email overload becomes a performance management issue that impacts efficiency, effectiveness and the financial bottom line. It must be addressed systemically beyond issuing a set of rules.

- #1 Don't create a broad set of rules or policies that won't stick. Creating a set of guidelines or protocols that can be demonstrated without contradiction, such as "Don't CC anyone as an FYI" can go a long way to reducing email and establishing trust for employees who feel compelled to include others on their messages.
- #2 Establish if, when, and how someone should update you and others.
- #3 Evaluate how decisions are made and give clear direction on work assignments.
- #4 Incorporate a simple protocol in meetings that establishes how follow-up actions will be communicated.
- #5 Create standards, such as labeling the Subject line with "Action Required"
- #6 Provide training, such as communication styles and how to handle meetings. It will reduce the time to generate or reply to email.

MESSAGE BLACK HOLES

A "message black hole" is the abyss where your message went without any acknowledgement that it was received, understood, appreciated, or acted upon. Navigating these black holes requires more about knowing yourself (personality) and your needs, than about techniques or actions to achieve less email. But the end result will still create less email.

PRACTICES – CREATE STRUCTURE – GET CONTROL

DON'T

- #1 Do not check email first thing when you wake up, or when you arrive into the office. Set-aside "start-up" time to plan your day and know "What are the most important things I need to do today?"
- #2 Do not reply unless you were asked, or unless you expect action.
- #3 Do not be quick to reply. "The mouth is in gear before the brain is engaged" is equally dangerous with a keyboard.
- #4 Do not "Reply All." What's important to you is not to others.
- #5 Do not use the "High Priority" flag unless it requires immediate attention and action.
- #6 Do not send jokes, cartoons, or motivational messages. You're creating a reputation that your messages are intermingled with unimportant meaningless content that doesn't warrant consistent respect.

DOs

- #1 Send less email, (those are the three magic words!), and you will generate fewer responses. If you send less, you will get less.
- #2 Create structure for when you check and send email. Spontaneous checking keeps your brain always "ON" and one message leads to another. The mail becomes your driver without you in control.
- #3 Before sending, ask yourself "What do I want as a result of sending this?" Do I need an action? If this message isn't high priority, then keep it in DRAFT to send 3 – 5 days later.
- #4 Get to the point. Try to use bullets. Remind yourself that your message recipients have just as much going on in their day as you do in yours. Put action items in an obvious location. Put "Action Required" or "FYI" in the Subject line.
- #5 Communicate expectations with staff, senders, peers, etc. Let them know that you check email at specific times. Then, be consistent about it. If you reply during evenings and weekends then expect undesirable consequences.
- #6 Turn off the audible or tactile (vibrate) notification that you have email and/or text messages. Don't become a slave to your device's "ding!" You're disrupting your ability to be focused, and you're telling others that you're always available and to "contact me anytime."
- #7 Unsubscribe to email newsletters and notifications, such as from Facebook and Twitter.
- #8 **Recognize your style.** Your personality type impacts your communication style. It determines what you need to say; how much you say; the type, style and frequency of the message; and thus impacts how others will respond to you. Know yourself and your personality that drives you, and how it shows up in the way you attend to mail. If you don't know your personality type, then find a class, take a test, or locate a professional that can help you know it and how to effectively self-manage to be more influential. One example is if you like lots of facts and data, then you'll tend to share that in your communications, resulting in excessive time writing email without consideration for the receiver, who might not care.

We've evolved into the modern day "Pavlov's dog" of automatic response to technology commanding our attention. The "ding!" of incoming email gets our attention and we move into auto-pilot response. The technology drives us instead of us staying in control of it as a tool. Challenge yourself to do it better and to self-manage your personality style while adapting to the styles of others. Don't let your blind spots impact your success or negatively affect your ability to be influential.

1 = *Radicati.com Aug 2012 – A technology market research firm.*

Posted on the blog <http://mycoachken.blogspot.com/2013/02/communication-how-to-reduce-incoming.html>