

E-mail's Quirks and Wonders

E-mail differs from every other form of communication we've ever known. It is direct, global, and usually (but not always) one-to-one, yet it lacks the personal touch of a handwritten letter. Much like television and radio, people often use e-mail to broadcast messages to a wide group of disparate individuals. However, e-mail triggers a response from recipients in a way that broadcast media cannot.

E-mail has had a tremendous impact on our work lives. It is hard to believe that something so inanimate can evoke such strong reactions, as "I love it" or "I hate it." What is it about electronic mail that causes such diverse feelings to surface?

The late communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) predicted e-mail's legacy in the 1960s. He looked

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for patterns between society and technology advances and believed that each new advance in communication created a shift in the way that we lived, worked, and played. His statement, “We shape the tools and they in turn shape us,” was based on observations of how driven and hungry society was becoming to develop new technologies. As our acceptance of electronic mail shows, society was equally ready to embrace them and look for ways to adopt them for our overall pleasure and benefit.

We welcomed e-mail as a productivity tool that would connect us to the world and create new freedoms and efficiencies. It now appears that e-mail is managing the pace of our work, slowing us down in the process through longer, not shorter work hours. In other words, we allow e-mail to dictate too large a part of our work routines. Perhaps it’s because e-mail is constantly at work that, more and more, we are as well. This current situation in our workplaces may place us exactly where McLuhan predicted we would be—managing the changes and tensions that new electronic communications impose for our betterment.

Many of us experience a seeming lack of control over electronic mail. We do not use e-mail uniformly. Some thrive on its use, checking their inboxes constantly, while others see e-mail as a low-priority communication channel, checking it infrequently. Most of us are somewhere in between, trying to balance the demands of work and the demands of e-mail.

As with other communication channels at work, use of e-mail has brought about the development of a unique set of usage patterns that color our habits, behaviors, and attitudes toward the device itself. We have developed a love-hate relationship with our favorite communication channel. We have also surrounded e-mail with our perceptions on its purpose and

indeed the reason for its very existence. For instance, many people felt that e-mail would signal the end of paper in offices. The reality, as we all know, is quite different. This aspect is covered later in the chapter when we address the many myths about e-mail in the workplace.

E-mail is a fascinating and curious tool. I'm not sure whether it came with its own set of quirks and wonders for us to explore or whether these naturally developed. Regardless, we do find ourselves committing some alarming faux pas when we press the send button. Through my research, I have noted what many respondents have said are the various games people seem to play with electronic mail. This chapter is designed to poke a bit of fun at our fascination with it. We explore some of the commonly held beliefs about e-mail and identify behaviors to make sense of some of the situations we face every day. You may see yourself in these pages, and you will no doubt recognize the patterns that emerge. It is through identifying these patterns that we more deeply understand the sources of our feelings and frustrations with workplace e-mail.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Have you ever received a follow-up e-mail or phone call asking if you had received an original e-mail? Or better yet, something I call the “creative” follow-up—a second e-mail that states that you may not have received the first one because of a sender error. E-mail's instantaneous nature has created a set of high expectations in the workplace. This instant scenario is mapped from the impatient sender's perspective in Figure 1.1.

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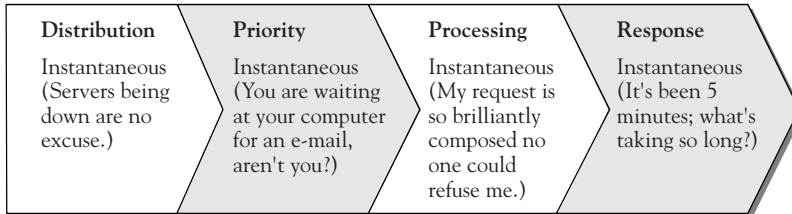


Figure 1.1 Response expectations of impatient e-mail senders.

Most people assume that because many of us have laptop computers, dial-up access at home, and personal digital assistants (PDAs), we should be able to receive and respond to work-based e-mails anytime and anywhere. Such expectations only increase the tension in the communications process. If you tend to think of e-mail simply as a hybrid of written and oral forms of communication, then a typical receiver's expectation for a response follows the pattern shown in Figure 1.2.

According to my research on e-mail management, the majority of us process our incoming mail within 48 hours or sooner, if we know a message is high priority. As we see from Figure 1.2, the time it takes for us to process e-mail messages is not less than it is for written and oral communication because the e-mail medium itself does not affect the amount of consideration that a decision requires. In fact, many of us will

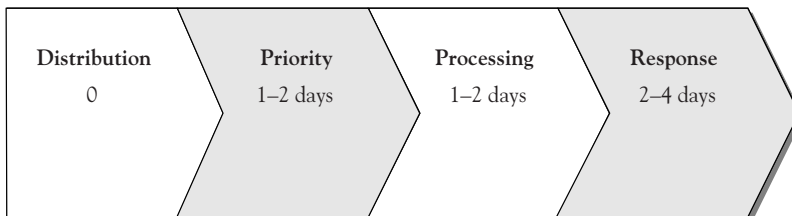


Figure 1.2 Response expectations of a typical e-mail receiver.

deliberately wait to respond to an e-mail message if we want to give an issue greater consideration. Even though e-mail does not directly affect our decision-making process, we feel pressure, both external and internal, to respond to e-mail messages as quickly as possible. E-mail has essentially become *communication without boundaries*.

How do you tend to regard an e-mail about a routine matter that an employee or colleague sends to your work e-mail during the middle of the night or over the weekend? If the sender is traveling across time zones, is preparing to be away from the office (or returning), is simply known at times to be a night owl, or is the CEO, this may not seem unusual.

However, if there are no such circumstances, you might react negatively. You may wonder if the person is trying to impress you or if your colleague is working too hard or is just inefficient. Many executives have told me that while they may review and process e-mail over the weekend, they will not send responses until Monday. We discuss this practice in more detail in Chapter 3.

THE 10 TEMPTATIONS OF E-MAIL

Just as e-mail has caused an unspoken tension in the workplace because of unrealistic expectations for instant response, it has also created and/or magnified other problems, which we discuss next as the 10 temptations of e-mail.

Have you ever noticed how e-mail use, or rather misuse, can bring out the worst in people? This is e-mail's dark side. There are as many cyber sins people commit using e-mail as there are

human characteristics; the good news is that I managed to group these offenses into only 10 broad categories. Even better news is that you'll doubtless be able to identify with the 10 temptations I've highlighted, a collection of many behaviors we have seen in others and reactions that we feel during an e-mail stress moment. As you read through the book, you will see these temptations discussed in detail along with solutions for each. For now, view this list as a tidy package designed to compress your collective viewpoints and to encourage better e-mailing habits in all of us.

The Temptation to Send

The tendency to send a message without regard to its significance is based on the mistaken belief that people will read everything that you send and that everything you send is worth reading. It's a sort of narcissistic tendency that only the e-mail communication channel can satisfy. Such e-mail messages can run the gamut from "I loved this, so will you," to multiple copies of the same companywide e-mail, to the cute homilies and kind thoughts for the day, such as "please send to 10 friends, or you will have a bad day." Many of us receive up to a dozen or more of these messages every day and wish we didn't.

The Temptation to Respond

Usually, we just don't know how to respond to these trivial messages. At times, there is an emotional or social need to somehow fill the communication void. Common mistakes include sending a thank you response to acknowledge receipt of the e-mail. It gets worse when the you're welcome e-mail arrives in our

inbox. Another common mistake is sending the appreciation e-mail: “Thanks for sending me this information; you can be assured I will give it my full attention.” A message like this creates an expectation that at some point you will address the message more fully. It also serves to encourage more sending just to get the response.

The Temptation to Broadcast

At times, this issue defies logical explanation. Distribution lists are a convenient time saver when critical information needs to go to several people. The real problem here is: Which person for which issues? If 10 people from a list of 100 need to receive a message, that is, “send in your forms,” why does everyone get it? Or better yet, why are “all employee” e-mails forwarded by some managers with their own direction to read it because it’s important? One survey respondent told me: “In Wilmington, I don’t need to know that the bathrooms are broken in Minneapolis.”

The Temptation to Treat People with Disrespect

This habit can be akin to office tyranny—we send employees an urgent e-mail just to determine how long it takes them to respond or when they are arriving at work. Most of the time, however, this habit relates to a lack of basic politeness in e-mail discourse. There are some people whom you may want to keep at e-mail distance just because of this sort of behavior. However, adding a salutation, such as the recipient’s first name, and a closing, such as “Thanks,” can significantly change the message’s tone. We practice civility in person and over the phone, so why not in e-mail?

The Temptation to React

Even though we can put any type of communication into a text form, this doesn't mean that the message belongs in that form. Some e-mail is composed in such a terse, brusque manner that we tend to react emotionally first, then think about it later. While we are emotionally charged, our fingers are doing the talking over the keyboard, and we triumphantly poke the send button, signifying the "back at you" response. The satisfaction generally lasts 5 to 10 minutes, and then we come to the realization that this might not have been a good idea. Worse yet, we have to undertake face-to-face damage control.

The Temptation to Hide behind E-mail

Have you ever received an apology by e-mail? Have you ever received praise by e-mail? Some employees have actually had their jobs terminated by e-mail. These types of e-mail are simply bad form and tend to expose the sender's reluctance to communicate with us in person. Worse, if the sender is a senior executive, these antics can color our attitudes toward the organization. These types of messages can be a serious catalyst for seeking other employment. It is important to keep in mind that e-mails with negative content can be like bombs—very explosive.

The Temptation toward Mutiny

The sound of a new message arriving puts you into a dilemma: Should you interrupt your work or break your concentration from a meeting or phone call? Do you ever wonder why a colleague or

coworker sitting two offices away prefers to send you an e-mail, rather than dropping into your office? Or why someone has suddenly copied you into a set of electronic messages? Again, you are not alone here. These situations all cry out for the human moment when high-touch is preferable to high-tech.

The Temptation to Become Addicted

Some among us prefer e-mail to all other forms of communication. These are people who previously favored memos as their primary form of contact and only used the telephone when absolutely necessary. Voice mail was a godsend for them, because they didn't need to waste their time on banal pleasantries. Some of these users are simply hard-core technology enthusiasts, who become so enamored of their monitors and keyboards that they're mesmerized by them.

Some people attend the meeting, but in reality are simply waiting for the e-mail to arrive. Others see receiving e-mail as a badge of honor and a demonstration of their importance. The cavalier few among us draw attention to themselves by handling their e-mails in public, while commuting on trains and planes. We need to beware of sprouting into technological couch potatoes.

The Temptation to Send Attachments

This one comes straight from the annals of "If you can, do so." At a recent workshop on e-mail, I was asked, "What do you think about receiving an e-mail with 25 attachments?" Luckily I caught myself in time, before responding, "Delete." Somehow

people have gotten the crazy notion that while e-mails should be short, attachments are a free-for-all; a bonus gift in which everyone will surely want to share. This is discussed more fully in Myth #6.

The Temptation to Cry Uncle

If there is one message to shout from our office rooftops, it is that it's normal and perfectly acceptable to feel overwhelmed, especially if you are receiving more than the current North American average of 48 e-mails per day. The sense of being swamped becomes more acute as volume increases and reaches almost cosmic proportions at 80 to 100 per day.

Sometimes people feel that it is their fault that they cannot handle or absorb the information, and therefore something must be wrong with them. That is not true—the current e-mail volume is unreasonable and counterproductive. Read on; this book will help!

DEBUNKING E-MAIL MYTHS

Now that we have uncovered some of the idiosyncratic e-mail habits in the workplace, let us dispel some of e-mail's larger-than-life myths.

Myth #1 E-mail Saves Time

Have you ever found yourself sitting at the keyboard in the office and suddenly feeling that you can't type the message you want to send? You are not alone.

Many people experience this phenomenon from time to time—I call it the “keyboard stare”—a sudden state in which your fingers just won’t type. Meanwhile, the minutes tick by, and so does your focus on this task and perhaps others. This situation surfaces generally because we want to talk our message rather than type it. We may want to express a number of ideas in a dialogue fashion but unfortunately e-mail seems more convenient. Also, there is no doubt that e-mail provides an invaluable capability to send the same message to many parties, thus saving time spent in separate transmissions. The problem is that now *everyone* gets too many messages, and so we must spend even more time managing our inboxes.

If we quantify the e-mail communication channel in light of the other three—face-to-face, telephone, and paper-based—then e-mail represents a 33 percent increase in communication opportunity. If e-mail simply off-loaded communication traffic from the other three channels, there would be fewer meetings, fewer telephone calls, and fewer paper-based items—the slack having been taken up by electronic mail. But this has not happened.

E-mail has not dramatically impacted message complexities and symbolic meanings, only the corporate context. So we have ramped up its use because the capacity exists, without relinquishing our need for the use of the other channels. The result has been a lengthening of the work day, estimated at an hour per day (to be explored in more detail in Myth #2).

Executives who proactively manage their department’s e-mails report receiving an average of 25 per day—a figure they believe is realistic and manageable. Comparing this to the current average of 48 a day, we have almost doubled the volume of necessary e-mails. We can therefore conclude that people who are receiving more than 25 e-mails every day are probably:

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- Receiving more information than they need
- Receiving more information than they can read
- Working longer days just to manage the excess traffic

Ask 10 people if they would give up their e-mail system and most would probably say “absolutely not.” We cannot imagine working without e-mail, nor should we have to. E-mail clearly has an opportunity cost, but at 25 messages per day, the benefits of this communication channel far outweigh the cost. At 40 or more messages per day, the productivity costs become marginal.

One last word on the myth of e-mail productivity: Have you ever been speaking to a person on the telephone when he or she suddenly asks you to repeat what you just said? If so, you can probably safely assume that they are probably trying to knock off a few e-mails while conversing with you. While this may seem a noble effort to multitask when time is scarce, it actually reduces productivity. Why? Because the phone call takes longer for both parties while key points are repeated. In addition, the e-mails require full concentration if they are to be effective communication devices. So instead of multitasking for efficiency, we are actually creating more unnecessary work. We discuss this more in Chapter 5.

Myth #2 Using E-mail Is Profitable

“Tell me what you like best about e-mail?”

A popular response to this survey question is that e-mail allows the same message to be transmitted to several individuals simultaneously. The implication is that e-mail provides tangible efficiency and an overt cost savings (e.g., “Without

e-mail, when would I have the time to pass this information to my direct reports?”).

“Tell me what you like least about e-mail?”

“There is too much,” is the common lament. The implication is that e-mail carries with it user burdens that equate to personal or sweat equity, which many tend to consider nontangible (e.g., I now have to borrow from my personal time to keep up).

Does e-mail have a cost? Are you always better off using e-mail? At what point (if any) does using e-mail become an opportunity loss? How much e-mail is too much?

Calculating E-mail's Demands on Our Time

My research shows that 64 percent of e-mail messages require a response. Using that number, we can derive the following characteristics for workplace e-mail:

1. 64 percent of e-mail requires a response—5 minutes spent on average for each response.
2. 36 percent of e-mail doesn't require a response and can be divided into two groups:
 - a. 50 percent are of low or no relevance—2 minutes to consider and delete each item.
 - b. 50 percent are for information only—8 minutes to deal with each item (whether to read, to file and read later, or to skim and discard).

Using the natural rate of 25 e-mails (established in Myth #1), we can calculate the amount of time spent on e-mail, as follows:

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$$\begin{aligned} 16 \text{ e-mails require response at 5 minutes each} &= 80 \text{ minutes} \\ 5 \text{ e-mails are irrelevant at 2 minutes each} &= 10 \text{ minutes} \\ 4 \text{ e-mails for info only at 8 minutes each} &= \underline{32 \text{ minutes}} \\ &= 122 \text{ minutes} \end{aligned}$$

Because most of us receive approximately 48 e-mails a day, we can now recalculate the total time we spend managing e-mail during a typical workday as shown in Table 1.1.

To keep these estimates as conservative as possible, let's assume that you process information more quickly than the average person either because you are a quick typist or because you keep your responses to e-mail as brief as possible. Reducing the processing times by 25 percent still results in three hours a day spent managing e-mail.

Earlier, I said that it takes the average worker about two hours a day to manage 25 messages. Therefore, we can compute the minimum daily overload that e-mail is causing each day as shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.1 Daily Time Spent Managing Average E-mail Volumes

48 E-mails per Day	Number of E-mails	Time in Minutes
Response required (64%)	31	155
Irrelevant (18%)	9	18
Information only (18%)	<u>8</u>	<u>64</u>
Total	48	237
		3.95 hours

Table 1.2 E-mail Overload: Daily Calculation Based on Average E-mail Volumes

48 E-mails per Day	Time (Hours)
Total time spent	3.95
Above reduced by 25%	2.96
Less: time spent on 25 e-mails per day	2.03
E-mail overload per day	0.93

Now let's consider a situation that we've all faced—dealing with e-mail messages after we've spent time away from the office. How do these calculations look when we are faced with 200 e-mail messages?

The numbers in Table 1.3 illustrate how much time we spend on e-mails that require a response, coupled with the time it takes for us to wade through irrelevant and low-level information. And let's not forget the time it takes for us to figure out how to tackle this huge mess.

The greatest levels of dissatisfaction with the e-mail channel relate to the sheer volume of messages we receive in our

Table 1.3 Time Spent Processing 200 E-mails

200 New E-mails	Number of E-mails	Time (Minutes)	Time (Hours)
Response required (64%)	128	640	10.7
Irrelevant (18%)	36	72	1.2
Information only (18%)	<u>36</u>	<u>288</u>	<u>4.8</u>
Total	200	1,000	16.7

inboxes. In particular, it's the volume of unnecessary messages that aggravate most of us because it's so easy for people to send us information. Irrelevant or low-priority e-mail traffic not only impedes our ability to prioritize our inboxes, it also dampens our motivation to do so.

The costs of stress-related factors are difficult to capture, and I have ignored them in my calculations. However, we must nevertheless make allowances for them. Depending on your industry and organization, the allowances could easily be an additional 20 percent.

Now that we have dealt with e-mail's intangible costs, what about the potential impact of its more tangible costs? Our calculations of e-mail overload can help here.

Let's make the following assumptions:

Employee annual salary	\$50,000
Cost of benefits (25 percent)	\$12,500
Fully loaded corporate cost	\$62,500 per annum
Hourly employee cost (260 days at 7.5 hours per)	\$32.05

The annual cost per employee of e-mail overload (still using our conservative figures) is shown in Table 1.4.

The more e-mails we receive each day, the more these costs increase, with the most costly shift occurring between 48 and 75 e-mails a day. Again, these are tangible costs, and do not include the intangible (and indeterminate) costs that stress has on our productivity and motivation.

These numbers may appear relative and simply the cost of doing business. Some skeptics may argue that a saving of a few

Table 1.4 Calculation of Annual Cost of E-mail Overload per Employee

E-mails	National Average (2002)	High-Volume Average
Number of e-mails	48	75
E-mail overload per day	0.93 hours	2.62 hours
Hourly employee cost	\$32.05	\$32.05
E-mail overload cost per year per employee	\$7,750	\$21,830

thousand dollars per year for each employee, if that employee was not coping with wasteful, low-value e-mail, would be wasted somewhere else. So why bother to be concerned? After all, virtually all employees use e-mail in the workplace, and no one today would ever do without it.

But for an entrepreneur with 100 employees, this equates to an annual cost of nearly \$250,000 (assuming the average number of messages these employees receive is 35 a day). Ask these entrepreneurs if they would like to find an easy way to save \$250,000 in operating costs every year and they will surely jump at the chance. What about larger organizations that employ thousands of people? For every 1,000 employees who earn an average of \$50,000 a year and receive approximately 48 messages a day, there is potentially \$7.7 million every year that is wasted on excess, low-value e-mail traffic.

If these same employees receive 75+ e-mails per day, then the annual cost can jump to over \$21 million. Again, these are purposely conservative calculations that show most companies' real

costs. These numbers are based on an annual salary of \$70,000. What happens to the costs for employees earning \$150,000 who receive 75 e-mails a day? In this case, it would take only 179 of these executive employees to create an e-mail overload cost of \$12 million. Factor in the effects stress has on motivation and productivity, and this is definitely money that is spent to achieve negative returns.

Although e-mail is a productivity tool, it is also a critical corporate resource that requires the attention of line managers and executives to ensure its most cost effective operation.

Myth #3 E-mail Expands Communication Flow

E-mail has become the most dominant form of communication in the workplace, virtually rendering the business memo or facsimile extinct, while minimizing varying levels of personal contact. Electronic mail capability in the workplace has created the following assumptions:

- E-mail has brought back the art of written communication.
- E-mail communication carries unexpected emotional weight.
- Access to e-mail destroys communication barriers, thereby creating workplace democracy.
- Many e-mail users don't consider privacy an issue.

Let's review each of these assumptions.

The Art of Written Communication

Electronic mail has definitely brought back the art of written communication, but clear, concise writing is a skill that is challenging for many people. Whether you have seen the world's longest e-mail (the paragraph that never ends) or the world's shortest e-mail (a one-letter response such as Y, N, or OK), I am sure that you are all too familiar with the challenges of message composition in the workplace.

Writing weaknesses abound. I recall receiving an e-mail from an author who had written several books—what he had to relate impressed me very much. I then forwarded this message to a friend who was a fan of the author. His response? A curt e-mail that noted that the author should learn how to spell. Admittedly, I was angry with my friend for being so critical, but the impression remained. The written word really does matter.

Although e-mail is the quickest way to share written forms of communication, it may not be the quickest way to create a mutual understanding. I am sure you can easily recall e-mail messages that caused you alarm, concern, or anger, yet most of them weren't sent with that intention. Do you remember the first angry message you received or the most recent? What about messages that you sent prematurely?

Emotional Weight

While e-mail can be seen as information with motion, it is also information with *emotion*. In the absence of the barriers of time,

distance, and editing for composition and tone, e-mail messages are a very direct route from one person's thoughts to another. Therefore, electronic messages carry an emotional weight. It is this emotional weight that many e-mail users in a workplace setting have underestimated.

Too often, we send messages that we should deliver in person. Unfortunately, the e-mail channel makes it easy for us to say things that we would never say directly to a person, making it easy for us to "hide." In the workplace, we need to enhance our communication by ensuring that we use e-mail only when it's appropriate and not by default. We must keep the other channels of communication open for use as well.

Destroying Communication Barriers

Another often-heralded benefit of e-mail is its ability to connect all users and virtually transcend hierarchies. Rather than sending letters to your government representative, which you would expect to be intercepted by an aide, you now have the power to reach your representative by e-mail. Not true, since most elected representatives have their aides respond to your e-mail messages. The CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation may see your e-mail but it's just as likely that an executive assistant may handle it. Although you can use e-mail to reach the offices of the powerful, your message may have no more impact than a letter would have had 10 years ago. Some cyber buffs may have regarded e-mail as the key to global connectivity, world peace, and environmental harmony; the truth is that electronic mail is just another communication channel with its own limitations.

E-mail Privacy

In today's electronic age, most of us have concluded that all things digital, monitored, and stored have replaced human contact. We suspect that we have another boss—one who lurks within the bowels of our computer and its e-mail system and is watching our every move. Some companies, in an effort to discourage personal e-mails, tell workers that their “e-mail may be monitored.”

Most of us are familiar with the highly publicized corporate lawsuits that center on crucial e-mail messages. Batteries of lawyers examining e-mail messages retrieved from executive offices and assessing their context—what were the messages really conveying? Was there more than one meaning? How far from the actual truth can we push the envelope to make these words and sentences fit our side of the case?

Should we care about privacy while using our workplace e-mail systems? Some of us may argue that controlling e-mail messaging restricts the free flow of information that it was intended to unleash. Again, there is not one simple answer, but trends can be quite revealing. Few people today would use e-mail to convey formative corporate strategies. In their view, verbal discussions and informal note-taking afford the best protection to sensitive corporate information.

Myth #4 E-mail Creates a Paperless Office

Does part of our drive to use e-mail come from the notion that we are working toward a paperless office?

For decades we have been hearing about the cashless society and the paperless office. It appears that technology prognosticators made these predictions much too soon. According to the book, *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, we are not ready to forgo paper for thinking or processing information because paper helps us to concentrate on new ideas and complex tasks. It stimulates both the creative and the collaborative processes.

While technology has given us the ability in many instances to work without paper, some tasks are best done on paper. For instance, I could never imagine the late John Lennon or George Harrison composing lyrics on a laptop while sitting in an airport—could you? Collaborative composition cannot be fully effected through technology. During corporate America's darker days in 2001 to 2002, paper shredders were center-stage as companies tried to destroy written documents to keep ahead of litigation. This is a current testament to our human and legitimate reliance on paper. Of course, we now know that they should have been equally concerned about destroying their hard drives that retained so many of their "deleted" electronic messages!

Quite simply, there are not many paperless offices in existence because we don't consider paper passé. Rather, the introduction of electronic messages has simply provided another option for recording and storing information. E-mail was not designed to create the paperless office any more than debit cards were intended to replace currency. They are alternatives that serve to enhance and expand on basic capabilities. What the advent of e-mail has generated is, in fact, a greater need and dependence on paper.

Using e-mail to send and receive messages has simply changed when and how we introduce paper into our information-gathering repertoire. For example, prior to e-mail, we received most information via paper. We dealt with the paper, making notes and comments, and then either returned the documents (after making copies for files) or filed the items directly.

In an e-mail system, we receive information principally via monitors. From a process of elimination, we can make the following estimates about the nature of workplace e-mail: Some information (up to 20 percent) we read and quickly acknowledge by return e-mail or no response is required. Another 20 percent of e-mail is workplace spam from a variety of sources (we discuss this later). Another 20 percent is internally generated corporate communication from a variety of senior executives and/or functional departments. The remaining 40 percent is more complex and requires printing, collating, reading, and filing, just like the days before e-mail.

So if you're receiving 50 e-mails per day, you will print approximately 20 of them along with their attachments. This assessment correlates quite closely with the aforementioned book's estimates that office e-mail increases paper consumption by 40 percent each year. Still not convinced? Then consider these statistics:

- North American paper consumption per capita increased by 12 percent from 1989 to 1999.
- The use of uncoated free-sheet paper (used in photocopiers, printers, and facsimile machines) increased in the United States by 14 percent between 1995 and 2000.

- Experts have tabulated that North American office printers spewed out 1.2 trillion sheets of paper in 2001; an increase of 50 percent since 1996.

Myth #5 All IT Professionals Are E-mail Efficiency Experts

Not all e-mail problems are the exclusive domain of an organization's IT personnel, who are regularly called on to resolve e-mail overload issues. IT professionals are there to ensure that systems are available for continued, unfettered, uninterrupted use. Their responsibilities are vast and complex, but relate largely to the mechanics of the operating systems and infrastructures that support the "front end" of organizations. Their concerns center on features such as efficiency of information flow, system capacity, integration of multiple systems, and technological architecture.

Given such a well-defined scope of operation, why is it that we turn to our IT experts to resolve end-user e-mail issues and problems?

I often use the analogy of another technologically-based communication channel—the telephone. For example, if you don't have a dial tone, you would call the internal phone support group or the phone company. However, if one of your employees is spending too much time on the telephone each work day or is making repeated annoying calls to certain individuals, would you, as the manager, call the phone company? No, this would clearly be an employee-management issue, and you would deal with it accordingly.

E-mail, as another technology-based communication channel, is no different. Problems with being able to send and receive e-mails, like the telephone's dial tone, are the domain of the IT professional. Problems with getting too many e-mails from unwanted and/or well-intentioned sources are not—these are problems for management to resolve.

Myth #6 Attachments Don't Require Management

When I wrote my research study in 2001, I made the 30-page report available in both paper and electronic formats. I also developed a three-page executive summary, which reduced the complex information to its most critical elements.

Whenever I get a request for an electronic copy of this report, I always offer the three-page executive summary first. After the recipients have had a chance to review it, I then state that if they still want the entire report (and I indicate clearly that it is 30 pages, low graphics), then I'm happy to pass it along electronically. This scenario is what I call "attachments management."

Do e-mail attachments require management? Just ask the number of remote users who often need to press the "CTRL-ALT-DEL" sequence to stop the loading operation. Or ask the executive who receives a 30-slide PowerPoint document along with accompanying notes the night before your presentation. Some senders treat attachments like tiny electronic bits that show up on the e-mail message template as a colored icon. For many receivers they are explosive, expanding jack-in-the-boxes, ready to jump out at you at a mere click and bury you in

information. Some people view attachments as a freebie—“Yes, I kept my e-mail short, well-tailored, and to the point.” Then the attachment demon takes hold and a 10-page report pops up.

We need to treat attachments like any other communication, all the while keeping bandwidth capability in mind. After all, one of the many great things about e-mail is its portability—you can log on at an Internet Café in Kuala Lumpur just as easily as powering up your laptop on a Caribbean beach. That’s why it’s important that we manage our attachments in an effort to consider the location of our receiver. We also need to manage attachments for their size. How big is too big? Many people, especially remote users, will say that 5MB is too large. Others will say that they don’t need all the graphics to make an assessment or to have the basic text information prior to seeing a live presentation. Still others will lament that they don’t want to see 30-page draft reports.

Once again, the fact that we can send a 30-page report doesn’t automatically mean that we should. If we must, then we should highlight the sections that require closer scrutiny. We probably would have instinctively done this with a hard copy report, yet when we are using technology as the transmission channel, we seem to abandon the reviewer preparations.

Another related issue is the attachment *headcount*—how many attachments are you sending and why? Again, even though technology permits us to send 20 or 30 separate attachments, why do so? In other words, send attachments only when absolutely necessary. If you want to send two attachments, think twice about whether the information is expected and/or welcome.

Let's look at this from another angle. How do you feel when you open an e-mail message and see five, six, or more attachment icons pop up? Happy that someone was thinking of your best interests, or annoyed that someone is pushing more work in your direction?

Myth #7 There Is Nothing We Can Do about Managing E-mail

Here is an interesting myth. Managing our inboxes is definitely possible and completely within our grasp. Although we seem to have less direct control over the messages we receive in our inbox—they appear and we react—technological applications such as filters do allow us to have some control over their ultimate destination. For example, we can choose to direct some messages to folders and delete others. We can also start sending fewer messages. It's like the old adage, the fewer we send the fewer we will receive. So far, this may seem easier said than done, but the next couple of chapters in the book will give so many reasons why we shouldn't choose to send e-mail that this myth may start to fade.

So for now, remember that the messages we do choose to send are completely within our control and are an excellent place to start taking some personal action. If we have the knowledge and the tools to help us recognize the types of problems that can occur with our e-mail communications, then we can begin to make changes for the better. Perhaps our exemplary messages to others will establish a new paradigm for them to follow.

INSTANT MESSAGING

Our discussions on e-mail's quirks and wonders would not be complete without acknowledging electronic communication's kid brother—the instant message. IM, as it is commonly known, started in the late 1990s to provide online, real time access among users on a “buddy list.” Compiled and managed by each IM user, the buddy list shows who is actually online at any given time, and therefore available as a potential conversational partner. The “conversations” are of course text-based and to date have been the nearest thing to synchronous electronic communication. IM, like e-mail, got its start at home through free public systems offered by major Internet service providers. IM, like e-mail, has found its way into the workplace. Unlike e-mail, most IM use is not supported through corporate platforms.

But this too is starting to change as both compatible software and corporate interest in IM begins to take hold. Since 2002, Wall Street has had a growing love affair with IM as a method to transmit quick (and secure) messages within its institutional walls and among its client base. IM is making its way into the workplace at exponential rates to satisfy a need to stay connected, but on a less formal basis. The growth of IM seems to be an unconscious recognition of the limitations of e-mail communication for casual, quick, and informal bantering that is such a necessary part of our organizational work life.

Let's take a brief look at communication systems within organizations. There are two basic systems:

1. *Formal.* Structured communication, usually prepared in advance, conveying some form of authority.

2. *Informal*. Casual, relaxed communication that emphasizes personal knowledge and common bonds.

These systems can move in three directions within organizations: upward (to superiors), across (to colleagues), and downward (to subordinates). The direction of communication affects both the style of the communication and the expectations of the receiver(s):

Direction	Expected Communication Style
Upward	Organized, logical, respecting hierarchies
Across	More personable with an emphasis on collegiality and common purpose
Downward	Information organized to suit the work group, the communication style is friendly yet professional

While the above dimensions are directly applicable to the formal communication system, they can also be applied to informal communication. We still observe greater formality in uncertain workplace situations, perhaps because workplace cultures continue to reinforce these communication rituals. Yet, our richest sources of information in the workplace tend to come from informal sources.

Henry Mintzberg first proved this in his book *The Nature of Managerial Work*. His studies on exchange of workplace information showed clearly that managers and executives rely heavily on informal communication systems to glean what he termed “soft information.” A common term used for many informal communication exchanges is “the grapevine.”

Some people think of the grapevine as simply hearsay and low-level office gossip, but it is a most powerful tool for the transmission of information that affects people within organizations. Although e-mail has the capability to spread information to multiple parties, the grapevine has the power to move information at Internet-like speeds. E-mail is definitely not the preferred mechanism for transmission of this type of informal information because it is too impersonal and lacks privacy. Exchanges of grapevine information are like a critical social glue that binds the workplace together. It is emotive and requires our expectations of instant human feedback to make the exchange complete.

For example:

DAVID: "There's a rumor going around that Brian is about to be sacked."

PERSON NO. 1: "Really? I'll believe it when I see it."

PERSON NO. 2: "Oh, that's too bad. I like working with him."

PERSON NO. 3: "Fantastic—that is the best news I've heard in a long time. How do you know?"

We can see here a variety of reactions. The information has been accepted for its potential as truth and also for its delicious speculation value. There is also a sense of community and belonging that we feel when someone trusts us enough to let us into their risky and intimate ideas. This is informal information power at its best. While there is a perception that grapevine information is inaccurate, studies show it is not only largely legitimate but 80 percent accurate.

In this example of a face-to-face verbal exchange, we can see and feel the value of tantalizing workplace speculation. We

can also see that this effect would be dampened, if not completely lost through using e-mail. Now imagine this scenario playing out through IM and you can see that the same tantalizing impact returns, because of the intimacy and immediacy of the medium itself. This helps to explain why IM is being self-installed on thousands of workplace computers each week.

It's interesting to start to draw some parallels between IM and e-mail's entry to the workplace. When e-mail was formally introduced and supported by corporations, its role was somewhat confused. Workers had questions because of e-mail's roots as home-based communication. Was it part of the formal communication system or of the informal? Now that I have access to everyone by e-mail, can I use this communication with senior executives? Electronic mail is not like a memorandum; do I really need to compose one, or can I just let it rip as it comes out of my thoughts?

Matters of content involving organizing thoughts, structure, clarity, and grammar remain the trademark of communication expressed in text form. We know that the easiest way to have your e-mail message judged poorly is to lapse into lazy writing habits that create negative impressions. With IM, this pressure is released and we can communicate in abbreviations, acronyms, and short phrases without observing any formal style at all.

Studies on IM in the workplace suggest that use of this electronic subchannel is informal and like the grapevine, mainly focused on work-related activities. Another parallel to the grapevine is the transitory nature of these conversations—short bursts of information and reactions back and forth, where participants are easily able to switch to more formal matters. An additional feature of IM is its “time out” capability. With IM,

you aren't expected to focus your full attention on these conversations, and they are intermittent enough that they can easily slide into those quick mental breaks that we take from even the most exciting and grueling work. IM truly acts like that social glue among coworkers.

IM also acts like a bridge between the other interactive communication channels. People will use it to check on whether their coworkers are available for an impromptu face-to-face chat or switch out of it to the telephone if the content of their messages requires more dialogue. There is rarely any channel switching between IM and e-mail. The reason is that IM is the electronic version of a casual conversation, not a transmission of information.

This chapter provided an introduction to the myriad of e-mail issues that swirl around us in our workplaces. This information is the foundation that prepares you to get the most out of the rest of this book. The observations offered here are designed to be digestible and thought provoking. They are also designed to give you clues on the breadth of issues that we all face in our collective struggles with e-mail. We can't begin to solve the problems until we have an understanding of their basic nature and their impacts both in terms of time and cost.

This chapter frames your perspectives on e-mail to motivate meaningful changes—both large and small—on your daily use and indeed, the choices you make when using e-mail. The next chapter guides you through the many hidden issues you face with your e-mails when considered from a legal viewpoint.