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Email culture – are you the slave or master?

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How can we make email work more effectively in the corporate LAN/WAN environment? Email is now the primary form of communication throughout the business world. Data networks groan under the sheer volume of incoming and outgoing email messages, and workers now nominate 'email overload' as a major source of job dissatisfaction, even burnout.

The dissemination and sharing of information via email has overtaken verbal exchanges in most organisations. Large, medium and small business enterprises now spend a significant proportion of their IT budgets trying to remedy the relentless deluge of email. And the effect on people can be just as problematic, with the introduction of new technologies which give us access to email instantly on our mobiles, blackberries and palm pilots.

Research indicates that we spend an average of 14.5 hours per week reading and answering email, while the time we spend looking for and analysing information costs companies \$28,000 per employee per year. (Microsoft, A new era of business productivity and innovation, 2006).

Email has become the work we do, slowing down our productivity. As email has evolved, so have our attitudes towards it, and our uses of it. I think that an urgent and selfish culture has evolved. It negates the time management skills developed in the 1990s and forgets that email is not a substitute for face-to-face communication. We have come to expect an immediate response to emails sent, and even send follow-up emails asking why the first one

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hasn't been answered. This has created a set of high expectations in the workplace.

Many employees experience a lack of control over their email, checking it often and randomly. There is a need to balance the demands of work and the demands of email.

Tom Schymitzek says, "We have become conditioned to more email quantity and less quality communication. Effective email communication requires aligning values and protocols to increase productivity and empower end users with sensible ways to send, receive and handle their emails."

What is now required are boundaries around email communication:

- defining acceptable behaviour
- learning how to adjust the email overload.

Without boundaries we will continue to allow email volume to escalate unnecessarily, increasing the amount of time and resources we spend on email.

Tips for changing email behaviour

1. **Time-manage your email.** Establish a system that enables you to take better control of your email environment, such as setting aside three times per day to send and receive email. It's hard to resist looking at the inbox

continually when the sound or a pop up window alerts you to every single message. If you are working on an important report, you ignore distractions such as the phone, but with email, it's almost too irresistible and, once you open the inbox, minutes melt away before you get back to the work at hand.

[A study from Hewlett-Packard found that workers who are constantly distracted by email and phone calls suffer a temporary ten-point fall in their IQ – more than twice that found in studies of the impact of smoking marijuana. The Age, September 2007]

If you do not know how to turn your alerts off, ask your IT department for assistance or use the Help menu. Turn off the alerts and watch your productivity rise.

2. **To send or not to send, that is the question.** Emails are often sent without regard to their importance. Keep in mind that an email that is critical to one person may be a low priority message to another. Think critically about whom you send email to, and why. Avoid CC's to everyone just to cover yourself.

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