

Chapter in “Insights on Productivity”

By the Members of the Network for Productivity Excellence

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E-mail...Friend or Foe?

What?

If a person commits a crime by killing another person in a car accident, no one would think of arresting the car or charging the car with a crime. The car, in this situation, is the *instrumental cause* of death, not to be confused with the *real cause*. Maybe the real cause was speeding, reckless driving, driving under the influence of alcohol...who knows. Maybe it wasn't a crime at all. Maybe it was an unavoidable accident. In all likelihood, law enforcement officials would be more interested in the *behavior* of the person driving the car, than the car. An inanimate object, such as a car, wouldn't be held responsible for the problem.

Okay, I understand it is a bit of a leap in imagination to apply this situation to problems with e-mail...or is it? If too many e-mails are *killing your productivity*, are you going to gain anything by blaming the e-mails? Are e-mails the real cause or simply the instrumental cause of the problem? Shouldn't you be more interested in the *behavior* of the person struggling with the e-mails?

In your situation, is e-mail a friend or foe? If e-mail appears to be your foe, are the incoming e-mails the real enemy? I think Walt Kelly, creator of the *Pogo* comic strip, said it best with his famous quote, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” If you are struggling with e-mail, your behavior, or more specifically, your e-mail processing habits are likely the enemy. If your current habits are causing problems, you can only hope to solve the problems by changing your habits. As the saying goes, in the end our habits become either the best of servants...or the worst of masters.

So What?

Human beings are supposed to be the most evolved creatures on Earth. The frontal region of the human brain is the most sophisticated resource available on the planet for dealing with life-enhancing functions such as planning, organizing, controlling impulsive behavior, assessing future consequences of current activities, and other issues referred to as the executive functions of the brain. People often compare the brain to a computer, however, the most powerful computers in the world still have nowhere near the comprehensive processing power of the

roughly three-pound grapefruit-sized mass of tissue we call the brain. Why is this incredibly powerful mental resource being so easily overwhelmed by such a seemingly innocuous digital opponent as e-mail? Perhaps your priorities are unclear and e-mail is something easy to tackle. Perhaps you are using e-mail as an avoidance strategy. Who knows why the e-mails win out over more important priorities? While you are pondering the psychological or philosophical reasons that you pay more attention to e-mails than more important issues, let's get practical and map out a plan to solve this problem.

Now What?

There are some excellent books and articles on how to effectively manage e-mails and I often share tips from these resources with my clients. For example, a short and easy-to-read book titled *The Hamster Revolution* by Mike Song, Vicki Halsey and Tim Burrell offers a wealth of practical ideas on managing e-mail. Mark Hurst also wrote an interesting book titled *Bit Literacy* on strategies for managing the flow of digital information from various electronic sources, including e-mail. The resources addressing this problem are almost endless. A Google search on 'e-mail tips' provides 465,000,000 results. However, I'm not sure sorting through the resources available and reading a long list of books, articles or blogs on e-mail tips is the first action you should take if you are experiencing serious problems with excessive e-mails. Instead, three simple choices will go a long way toward solving the problem and getting things going the right direction.

1. Choose to use e-mail only to the extent *it serves you*.
2. Choose to proactively reduce the number of e-mails you receive.
3. Choose to significantly improve your e-mail user skills.

Let's take a closer look at these three choices.

Choose to use e-mail only to the extent *it serves you*. This is the ultimate test with any so-called productivity tool...is this resource serving me or am I serving it? Call it a lifestyle choice, a serious commitment or whatever you prefer. Just make sure you stop complaining about your e-mail problems and start doing something about them. In one sense, you teach what you allow. Stop inviting or allowing people to interrupt you through e-mail. Eliminate the irrational belief that you must be accessible 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Establish reasonable boundaries that create an appropriate amount of time to focus on your top priorities each day.

E-mails are like fishhooks. Imagine a fish swimming around in a lake having a great time. The fish is in control of where he goes and what he does with his time and energy...until he takes the

bait and bites a hook. Once the fish gets hooked, the person at the other end of the line is now in control. It just doesn't make much sense to give up control of your time and energy by biting at the equivalent of fish bait, in other words e-mails, all day long. They say 80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your efforts. Unless answering e-mail is your top priority, you should consider totally ignoring your e-mail system for at least 20 percent of your day. If you still do not have enough interruption-free time to complete your top priorities for the day, gradually increase your quiet time until you achieve the right balance. Break the habit of going after the digital equivalent of bait that is dangled in front of you each day. Once you make a firm decision to stop allowing constant e-mail interruptions, you can read the books, articles and resources on e-mail tips and discover practical ways to implement your decision. For example, turn off the visual and audible e-mail alerts, use the phone when it is more appropriate, set aside specific blocks of time to process e-mails, etc.

Choose to proactively reduce the number of e-mails you receive. Once you make the lifestyle choice to limit your e-mail use to activities that serve you well, it is probably a good idea to take measures to reduce the flow of incoming messages. Reduce the number of e-mails you receive by sending out fewer e-mails (since the number of e-mails you receive is apparently a function of how many you send), limiting your use of the "reply to all" feature, using filters, using a separate e-mail address for retailers and others who might share your address with advertisers, or simply asking people who seem to use your e-mail address too frequently or inappropriately to stop (or blocking specific users with the blocking function on your e-mail system if they don't take the hint). If all else fails, stop using your old address and establish a new e-mail address and be more careful about how you give out your new address.

Choose to significantly improve your e-mail user skills. Both the books I mentioned earlier offer excellent advice on how to develop effective and efficient e-mail skills. In other words, how to become a power user of e-mails. They will teach you how to improve the quality of e-mails you send out, how to help those you frequently interact with improve the quality of their messages to you, and how to keep the messages flowing through your inbox properly. For example, Mark Hurst suggests that you focus on quickly and efficiently processing incoming messages and keeping your e-mail inbox empty. Treat your inbox like a computer game. The point of the game is to get better and better at quickly processing your incoming messages and clearing your inbox. You win when you have a totally clear inbox. The point is, e-mail use exploded overnight and is now well entrenched as a communication tool. Most of us have had very little training on how to use this tool. Don't assume you inherently know how to use this tool and get some training if you need it.

Einstein advised that we cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. The purpose of these three simple choices is to give you a logical framework for beginning to solve your e-mail problems. Since different techniques work for different people and in different situations, one chapter in a book can't address all the possible solutions. I'll keep studying the books, articles and resources and sharing more ideas related to each of these categories with my clients. Meanwhile, use these three choices to help make sure e-mail is your friend and not your foe.