



BUSINESS Columnist: Cheryl Hall

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Break the shackles of e-mail – oh, and no need to reply

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Tim Burress wants to end the e-mail madness.

The co-founder of Cohesive Knowledge Solutions Inc. in Guilford, Conn., spends much of his time studying Americans' e-mail habits, and he's troubled by what he sees.

Employees devote more than 40 percent of their workdays on virtual mail and consider at least a third of that time a total waste, he says. Companies are bleeding profits and lost productivity to the tune of \$308 billion a year, thanks to spam.

Each of us processes about 20,000 e-mails a year, and we spend an average of two minutes on each. But four out of five think there's little we can do to control the deluge.

OK, so e-mail overload is epidemic, you're thinking. What else is new?

One big thing: The pain is largely self-inflicted.

Mr. Burress' "very educated guess" is that a third of all junk mail is being generated within the company.

Most companies have effective filters that kill Viagra advertisements and other common external culprits. Now it's the internal spam – or iSpam – that's become corporations' worst virtual nightmare.

Do you routinely hit reply to all? Do you cry "urgency wolf" with the ! button? Do you copy everyone and his brother to keep folks in the loop? Are your messages disjointed and imprecise? Do you immediately forward e-mails to someone else just to get them out of your inbox?

If so, look in the mirror and greet the enemy.

Sending spree

Mr. Burress' company trains employees at major corporations such as Halliburton Co., Sprint Nextel Corp., International Paper Co. and Xerox Corp. about regaining the sanctity of their inboxes. A lot of that has to do with what they're sending.

The single best way to reduce e-mail is to send less, he says. "There's a 65 percent rate of return," which he calls the boomerang effect.

Garbage out brings garbage in.

And if you continue to send unnecessary e-mails, you risk being right-clicked into automatic junk mail. "About three to four e-mails per person per day is where receivers start to draw the line."

Mr. Burress, Cohesive Knowledge co-founder Mike Song and Vicki Halsey, vice president of applied learning at Ken Blanchard Cos., have written *The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your E-mail Before It Manages You*, published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

The book is based on their survey of 8,000 workers as well as a case study of 2,000 employees at financial services giant Capital One Financial Corp.

Reply to All

Among the biggest aha's: 75 percent said colleagues overuse the 'Reply to All' key, but fewer than 15 percent of them confess to committing this e-mail infraction.

"It's far greater than 15 percent – I can guarantee that," Mr. Burress says. "It's closer to 30 to 35 percent."

The favorite e-mail game is Hot Potato, he says. "Forward it to Cheryl. Type something like: 'Hey, thought this was funny. Here you go.' ... I feel good getting it out of my inbox. But Cheryl is thinking, 'Why did Tim send me this? This isn't necessary. It's bogging down my day.'"

"Ask yourself: 'Does Cheryl really need this?' "

Cheryl's thinking no.

You become what you send, at least in the minds of recipients, Mr. Burress warns.

"You will e-mail 100 to 200 times for every one face-to-face," he says. "But in a face-to-face, we put on our best suit. We put on our best shoes. We prepare our presentation. We get ready."

Disorganized

"With e-mail, we're racing through an airport, pounding our thumbs away on a PDA and thinking, 'Great! I've just sent another e-mail.' But the person receiving it is confused. Really, what have you done?"

You've given the impression of being disorganized.

"Our biggest point around improving quality is the strength of the subject line," he says. "If it's clear and descriptive, you tend to write a clear and descriptive e-mail."

Think of it as a newspaper headline, he suggests.

Then put the action or the main point at the top of the message. Put it at the end, and the reader may never get to it.

The best e-mailers batch process, he says. They set aside a time in the morning and afternoon to do their e-mails, and they don't touch it in between.

A key component of this is to make sure you can be reached for emergencies and urgent issues – on the telephone or with instant messaging. Use e-mail to set a precise time to discuss an issue over the phone.

If you're the one who needs timely action, establish a clearly understood deadline.

"If you say by EOB – end of business – when is that? What if I'm in Basel [Switzerland] today?" Mr. Burress says. "But if the e-mail says, 'Please get back to me by 5 p.m. Central time today,' that's very clear."

11,156 messages

There are people with thousands of e-mails held captive in their inboxes.

Mr. Burress once helped a woman pare down 11,156 to slightly more than 600. Her computer was so overloaded that it took two minutes to switch from one Outlook function to another.

But holy cow! She still had 600?

"Hey, when you start out at 11,000, that's a huge improvement," he says.

Mr. Burress charges companies about \$100 a person for a 90-minute tutorial on e-mail and a 90-minute session on filing and finding information fast.

Tom Dunning has brought in Cohesive Knowledge Solutions twice to help employees at his Dallas insurance firm, Lockton Dunning Benefit Co.

Mr. Dunning attended the first session and had several takeaways: "Tell what you want in that first sentence. Cut the fluff. Keep even detailed e-mails down to a page. Don't send thank-you e-mails. End e-mailing back and forth. Don't be tied to your handheld or your computer. Don't be a slave to your e-mail, which we all are.

"I often leave my desk so that I'm not distracted by e-mail or the phone."

Mr. Burress would be proud.

STOP SPINNING YOUR WHEELS

E-mail tips from Tim Bures:

- Send less. Don't abuse the "Reply to All" and "CC" features or group distribution lists. Target your e-mails – don't spray them.
- Quit boomeranging. Eliminate just one out of five outgoing e-mails, and you'll shrink your incoming volume at least 10 percent.
- Think before you send. Ask yourself whether your e-mail is helpful – timely, topical and targeted.
- Be polite but with conditions. Not every e-mail requires a reply. Make an agreement with your key contacts to reserve thank-you e-mails for extraordinary efforts.
- Adopt shorthand acronyms such as NRN (No reply needed) or NTN (No thanks needed).
- Instead of sending a message that launches a series of back-and-forth e-mails, use it to schedule a live conversation.
- Strengthen your subject lines. Weak ones confuse recipients and make it hard to locate e-mails later.
- No more wall of words! People don't read e-mails – they scan them. Start every message with a one-line greeting of no more than eight words.
- Use the "ABC" method to split the body of the e-mail into three distinct sections:

Action: summarizing your purpose.

Background: presenting your key points.

Close: clarifying the next steps.

- Coach – or suffer. Offer frequent senders a few good tips – or suffer through their really bad e-mails.
- Store purposefully. Ask yourself: What are the odds I'll need this information later?
- File smart. Create a limited number of mutually exclusive folders based on content – not sender, software or some other criteria. Use subfolders. Label everything carefully.