

Win the e-mail war

How to beat back the e-menace and rescue lost productivity

By **Paul Jay**

March 2004

Former Ford Motor Co. CEO Jacques Nasser had a tumultuous reign as head of the auto giant. He created controversy through his public dispute with Bridgestone tires and changed the culture of the company when he adopted General Electric's performance-ranking system. He also committed one of the cardinal sins of e-mail management: he added reams of junk to his employees' already overloaded inboxes. The addition in this case was a weekly darts-and-laurels style of memo from Nasser himself that recounted the events of the previous week, says Christina Cavanagh, a professor of management communications at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. "He even sent messages telling his employees that there would be no messages this week." Employees couldn't delete the memos fast enough.

In case you didn't know already, e-mail can be a huge drain on the productivity it's meant to enhance. "The average employee spends an hour reading almost 50 e-mails every day," says Cavanagh, who is also the author of *Managing Your E-mail: Thinking Outside the Inbox*. "That's a serious dent in the workday, and it is only growing worse." Although you may not be able to recover all that lost time, you owe it to your company and yourself to fight back.

Here are six key steps to unstuffing the inbox:

1. Lead by example

"People take their cue from the top, so every CEO needs to show hands-on leadership and be responsible for what they are sending around the office," says Raj Rajendran, a Toronto-based senior manager with management-consulting firm Bearing Point. "If you really do want to let your employees know what's going on across the company, you can put your updates on [your intranet]." Save e-mail for distributing essential and time-sensitive employee communications.

2. Know your software

Anti-spam software is relatively inexpensive and can be a big time saver, says Valerie Brown, director of knowledge management at WSI Corp., a Toronto-based technology-consulting firm. But installing the latest software is only half the battle. Without proper training, most employees won't know how to use the software to its optimal effect. Sure, they may know how to log on, tool through the system and send e-mail, but that doesn't mean they thoroughly understand the software. Set official training days and make them mandatory.

3. Craft a policy

An e-mail use policy is more than a legal and intellectual-property safeguard. It also protects you against electronic time bandits. Companies should develop policies so employees know what is or isn't appropriate use of e-mail, says Brown. While it's probably unrealistic to expect to eliminate private e-mail use altogether, letting employees know their e-mail may be periodically monitored can curtail excessive abuses of your system.

Furthermore, "Most company systems are only designed to carry official e-mail," says Rajendran. "So if people start attaching photographs and passing them around the office, it can potentially crash the system."

4. Be a discriminating receiver

Don't be afraid to delete dubious e-mail from unknown sources with suspicious-looking subject lines, says Cavanagh. If it looks like junk mail, then it probably is; opening and reading it will only cut into your time. If you accidentally delete an important message that requires a reply, it'll probably be sent to you again.

5. Be a conscientious sender

Everyone has an e-mail pet peeve. For some it's messages that have been indiscriminately "CC'd" to all employees. For others it's messages with large attachments that take forever to download. For Cavanagh, it's e-mail with a subject line that doesn't match the message (which makes it hard to find at a later date). Before you send an e-mail, ask yourself if everyone on your list needs to read it. If you need to send a hefty attachment, then send it as a text document to make the file more manageable. If you're replying to someone's e-mail and want to bring up a new topic, then change the subject header.

6. Pick up the phone

E-mail is not an effective tool for a running dialogue. "It takes far longer and is far more frustrating to try to reach a consensus using e-mail," says Cavanagh. Most back-and-forth notes could easily be eliminated if we lost our hesitancy to pick up the phone. Then we could save e-mail for what it is best at: communicating complex information quickly and to multiple parties.

© 2004 Paul Jay

PROFITguide.com

YOUR ONLINE GUIDE TO BUSINESS SUCCESS