The Email and Information Overload Report

To help document, develop and implement email best practices at GE Power & Water

Discussing the cost of email overload to workforce productivity and what leading companies are doing to stem the tide

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Executive Summary

The reduction in workforce productivity caused by email and information overload has become a well-documented fact at many organizations. When it comes to the sheer number and quality of emails sent and received, the cost to employee productivity and engagement can be staggering, including an inability to make decisions, process information, and prioritize tasks.

The issue commands the urgent attention of communicators, who have a mandate to prioritize, streamline and improve information flow so workers can separate signal from noise and focus on the strategic imperatives of the organization. But nothing will change until executives understand what the problem is costing the organization in hard dollars (or pounds, euros, rupees or yen). Companies like Intel have estimated the impact of email and information overload on each knowledge worker at up to eight hours a week, while others posit that reading and processing just 100 email messages can occupy over half of a worker’s day.

The following laments are heard at many organizations suffering from information overload: “I’m back from vacation and I have 800 messages in my inbox”; “I have no time to work at this company anymore, all I do is read and respond to email”; “Meetings at my company are counter-productive because no one is paying attention—all eyes are glued to computer screens and no one participates.” While ill-fated attempts like “no-email Wednesdays” resulted in a deluge of emails the following day, solving nothing.

Social intranet platforms like SharePoint 2010 have reduced dependence on email, providing a subscription-based model for information sharing—a pull (RSS) versus a push (email) model. A reduction in the number of emails is achieved through increased interaction by workers on team sites, blogs and other two-way communication channels. Workers use RSS feeds to subscribe to information they want and need, and respond using the same two-way communication channels, eliminating the need for email. Instant messaging and SMS (mobile text messages) offer an ideal platform for short bursts of communication, and community-based micro-blogging platforms like Yammer, Chatter and Jive also offer a user-friendly environment for team collaboration, status updates, document revisioning, threaded conversations and other information sharing outside the domain of email. A digital record (paper trail) is also available for most if not all of these channels, which may reduce the emotional dependence on email to cover for the purposes of covering one’s backside.

Some organizations have plans to eliminate internal email altogether, relying exclusively on social media tools and collaborative project management platforms, where workers collaborate inside the “workflow” rather than rely on email for the exchange of information.

Yet social media tools are not a given for every organization. Widespread adoption can be hampered by risk-averse corporate cultures, especially in the absence of executive sponsorship. Email remains the primary means of moving information inside and outside the enterprise at most organizations, and there
may be certain messages, ranging from client communications to thoughts requiring longer explanation, where email may still be the best medium.

Several well-known companies are cited in this report as coping with email and information overload, and suggested best practices for sending and receiving emails are also included.

Finally, this report reflects the changing role of the communicator, shielding workers from low-value information, facilitating conversation, and helping organizations to embrace change and harness evolving systems for engaging employees and fostering collaboration—not simply cranking out deliverables.

Key insights gleaned from this report will help begin our journey together toward actionable advice and strategic communication planning to restore productivity and overcome email and information overload.

**Chapter 1. The cost of email and information overload and the impact on workforce productivity**

The growth of email and impact on productivity is well documented. According to The Radicati Group, Inc., a technology market research firm’s 2010 study, the typical corporate user sends and receives about 110 messages daily. Roughly 18 percent of emails received are spam, comprising both actual spam and what is termed graymail, such as unwanted newsletters, alerts, etc.

The IABC’s Communication World Bulletin listed the following figures in late 2005 to illustrate how serious the information overload problem had become:

- 64 percent of employees say they experience information overload often or every day. (Farhoomand, 2002)
- 40 percent of executives say they spend between half a day and one full day every week managing communication that has no value. (McKinsey & Co., 2005)
- Nearly all employees report roughly the same amount of information overload. Researchers find no significant differences in information overload levels according to gender, age or job level. (Dawley, 2003)

Jonathan B. Spira, CEO and Chief Analyst at Basex, specializing in management science for the knowledge economy, estimates that email and information overload costs the U.S. economy a minimum of $900 billion per year in lowered employee productivity and reduced innovation. He goes on to say the figure—despite its heft—is a fairly conservative estimate and attributes a 25 percent loss of the knowledge worker’s day to the problem. A Basex blog entry from about a year ago pegs the number at $997 billion per year.
Spira describes information overload as an excess of information that results in the loss of ability to make decisions, process information, and prioritize tasks. In a Basex survey of more than 3,000 knowledge workers conducted in 2008, he discovered that workers spend up to 50 percent of their day managing information.

The blog post also cites Intel, a company of 86,300 employees, in the context of information overload: “At Intel we estimated the impact of information overload on each knowledge worker at up to eight hours a week,” said Nathan Zeldes, a principal engineer focusing on computing productivity issues at Intel and founding chairman of the Information Overload Research Group industry consortium.

Spira’s book, Overload! How Too Much Information Is Hazardous To Your Organization, also includes the following two statistics pertaining to productivity loss:

- Reading and processing just 100 email messages can occupy over half of a worker’s day.
- For every 100 people who are unnecessarily copied on an email, eight hours are lost.

Bill Boyd, who helped form the Information Overload Resource Group, wrote persuasively about The Staggering Cost of Information Overload in IABC’s September 2005 issue of Communication World Bulletin. He points to a 2000 study conducted by Pitney Bowes and independent nonprofit research group Institute for the Future that measures the number of messages employees received daily. He put the number at 168—inclusive of phone, e-mail, voice mail, postal mail, interoffice mail, fax and cell phone. But that was 11 years ago, so a significant increase in email should be factored in, not to mention instant messaging, SMS, RSS and other new ways the workforce connects today.

Lost Productivity
In terms of lost productivity, Boyd asks, “What does an hour of employee time cost? In U.S. knowledge organizations, it can easily average $50 including benefits—more if you add in everything it takes to support an employee. In a 1,000-person organization, if you can eliminate five minutes of wasted time, you’ve saved $4,167. Do that every weekday for a year, and you’ve freed up more than $1 million worth of productivity. Make it 10 minutes a day, and you’ve saved $2 million plus.”

“What gobbles up all that time with no benefit to the company? The mechanics of e-mail, for starters, like sorting through the hundreds of messages in your inbox and deleting messages you never should have received (cc’s and distribution lists are big culprits here). Filing messages you might need someday. Frantically nuking e-mails, or dragging them into folders, so the ‘send’ button will work once again. The problem isn’t just time spent on low-value activities. Interrupting employees is costly. Research shows that every time an employee must refocus his or her attention, it takes time and energy to mentally switch from Topic A to Topic B and back again.”

Boyd also cites an HP study documenting the diminished quality of thought created by email and information overload: According to the HP study, an average workers’ functioning IQ falls 10 points when distracted by ringing phones and incoming emails. The productivity impact over a day was
equivalent to the loss of a night’s sleep, not to mention the related stress factors, which are blamed for excessive absenteeism.

Chapter 2. Communication Solutions: What Leading Companies Are Doing to Cope with Email and Information Overload

2.1 Sender Protocols
Suggestions related to best practices for sending email run the gamut, from guidance about proper email length, whom to copy, and how to communicate concisely in bulleted summaries, to picking up the phone or meeting face-to-face, whenever possible.

The ability to reduce the number of corporate-wide messages is a separate discussion, but drastic reductions in the number of company-wide message have been achieved through the use of internal communication gatekeeper teams and strategic email templates as modeled by firms like Home Depot. Home Depot formed the multi-functional messaging gatekeeper team in response to challenges of corporate email overload. The team reviews requests submitted on the standard form, and renders a yes-or-no decision before sorting approved messages by channel.

Root cause analysis pertaining to the poor quality of email ranges from unclear content, too dense, takes too long to digest and not written with audience in mind, to no clear call to action, too much detail, and poor organization.

While complaints about the quantity of emails tend to spotlight the following inefficiencies: Too easy to send/reply to ALL; too many reminders; unnecessary messages; use of the wrong communication channel; message should be pulled (available on the intranet or through RSS feed) versus pushed (email).

Other efforts to reduce email include a ban on document revisioning using email, since collaborative technologies like Google Docs and wikis are widely available and better suited for this task.

Use of a clear and actionable email subject line is also advocated, such as: THREE questions for you, or announcing that you have three queries at the outset of your body message, and then setting them off in paragraphs that begin with Question 1, Question 2 and Question 3, and various other companies, including Carl Zeiss, employ simple codes in the subject header which help the receiver to answer or sort the email: FYI = information, Q = question, A = action needed, etc.

Visual cues are also said to speed up the effective reading and digestion of emails, including the chunking and grouping of related information; the use of color – which is said to increase readership and retention by up to 30%; the use of bullets or sub-heads to make the email “easy to scan”; halving the word count; use of more keywords; and the elimination of fluff like persuasive/promotional or introductory comments and lofty language.
TechCrunch has written a number of times about email overload and sending protocols, including an interesting post by blogger Jon Orlin, aptly named Email Overload Fix: Three Sentence Emails.

An IABC Report, Preparing Messages for Information Overload Environments, by Martin J. Eppler and Jeanne Mengis, offers meaningful suggestions and case studies on the topic of email overload and the ongoing quest to capture attention, ensure comprehension and foster retention.

Case Studies: Proctor & Gamble (P&G) & Microsoft
Eppler and Mengis describe the virtue of a consistent standard structure and scope to improve communication effectiveness of business memos, which P&G has used for many years. They argue that a proven generic structure can be flexible enough to capture a great variety of business issues and improve the processing of information, as workers spend less time making sense of a document’s structure:

P&G standardized email and memo template structure
If a proposal does not adhere to this structure or exceeds two pages, the authors assert, it will likely to be returned to the originator without being read by the target group.

1. The Idea: a one-sentence description of the main message.
2. Background: generally accepted background information on the idea.
3. How it Works: the details of the solution, including the what, who, when, and where.
4. Key Benefits: This section gives the motivation for the solution (such as aiding the strategy, being validated and delivering results).
5. Next Steps: What needs to be done when and by whom to achieve the stated benefits

The authors describe Microsoft as a company who realized, early on, that email wasn’t just a technical issue but a communication challenge needing structure. They offer the following email structure, “allegedly devised by Bill Gates himself,” which closely resembles the P&G memo style previously discussed. Parts one and two (background and conclusion) deal with the problem at hand and parts three and four (proposal and rationale) with the solution:

Writing emails that include tick boxes at the end of the message may also speed up the answering process, the authors suggest, and the call for an unusual but clear subject header (i.e., a question) is also reiterated.

2.2 Email Receiver Protocols
A disciplined approach to when we check email, and how long we spend at the activity, are two common suggestions offered by Nathan Zeldes, president of the Information Overload Research Group, and others interested in the science of reducing email and information overload.
Zeldes describes email overload as increasing proportionately along with one’s seniority in the organization, with executives receiving a few hundred incoming work-related message each day. It is so common that executives don’t even complain about it, either “coping with the crushing stress or delegating their Inbox processing to an assistant.”

“I’ve known one glaring exception, however,” notes Zeldes. “I knew a VP of a high-tech Fortune 500 company who had a perennially near-empty inbox, and was receiving a paltry few dozen emails a day. I inquired as to how he got to this enviable state, and he was happy to share. It was quite simple, in a way: this manager simply empowered those under him to do their jobs, and insisted they NOT copy him on email they could handle without him. Rather than hoard updates and status reports he could very well do without, rather than have his people cover their behinds by copying him on everything under the sun, he kept his time and mind free and uncluttered, which allowed him to actually manage – guide, role model and mentor those below him in the organization.”

Zeldes also offers a number of useful recommendations for overcoming information overload on his website, adding to our list of email receiver protocols:

- Process email in preset time slots only. I can’t overstate this one: checking one’s email 24x7 is a big killer of productivity and peace of mind. A good arrangement is 1-2 slots daily, preferably at those times of the day when you are least creative.

Q: OMG, what if someone needs to contact me urgently between slots?

A: That’s what telephones, IM, and SMS are for, remember?

- Turn off incoming message alerts! Beeps, animated icons, "toast" alert pop-ups that tell you a new message has just arrived - turn them all off, so you can focus and think. Yes, on your mobile device too!

- Don’t use your Inbox as a To Do list. Never keep read messages in it just to remind you to do something - there are better task management tools for that.

Move all read messages to folders (or the trash can). A flooded Inbox can obscure important messages and is depressing to boot.

- "Read every message only once." This continues the previous idea: once you open a message, process and move it immediately - respond to it, delete it, delegate it, file it in a folder, or put it in a "To Do Later" folder.

- Be ruthless - this is your lifetime that’s leaking away. You do need to scan email, it’s an important work and social tool, but letting it hog too much of your time comes at the expense of other work and life actions that are far more rewarding and important. Be swift and ruthless...
Q: What if I inadvertently miss an important message?

A: If it's so important, they'll send it again, or call you, won't they? Better ask, what if you never have time to play with your children?

2.3 Project-Based Approach to Work (Eliminating Internal Email)

Another exciting trend involves changing the way we work—moving to a more project-based mindset and paradigm where most of the information sharing takes place on or about projects and workflows, thus reducing an organization’s dependence on email.

Project and workflow management systems like Google’s Basecamp reduce email by moving most of the communication inside project-based environments. Messages are set up in a certain area, and the messages link intuitively to the Calendar, which lists project Milestones, and the To Do section, where someone with a specific need assigns a specific task or set of tasks to someone else and receives notification upon task completion, fostering closed-loop accountability.

Klick, a Toronto-based digital marketing company highlighted recently in Inc. magazine as The Company That Outlawed Email, used a similar approach in their quest to eliminate internal email.

The author, Jeff Haden, quotes Klick CEO Leerom Segal as saying, “In the very early days of Klick we started to recognize some basic challenges with email and wanted to find a better solution. While email makes for a decent communication tool with clients, internally it doesn’t facilitate collaboration and basic workflow. Email has no intelligent mechanisms for prioritization, lacks context, lacks a framework for knowledge management, and saps accountability.”

As Klick grew and the number of disciplines required for every project increased, basic commitments were increasingly more difficult to manage. Ultimately, the company created its own workflow management system called Genome, and then relied upon it for all of their internal communication needs.

“We’ve all been on an e-mail thread where people are answering questions but really just creating more confusion,” Segal says, “or maybe referencing some missing yet critical attachment. So we looked for tools to help us better manage our basic workflow.”

“Klick started by trying testing systems that managed basic work units. Using a work ticket, one individual clearly articulated a need, assigned it to another person, and included all relevant information. When the task was completed the ticket was routed back to the originator for verification.”

“Aaron Goldstein, Klick’s Chief Operating Officer, quickly recognized that work tickets could create the necessary level of accountability while overcoming two of the biggest weaknesses of email: Knowledge can get lost in a person’s mailbox and prioritization is basically nonexistent since inboxes assume that most recent equals most important,” Haden writes, adding that Goldstein felt the move away from internal email to a project-based system truly supported the needs of employees.
The Klick COO says the project-based system enables them to do a better job of “separating signal from noise, while making course corrections earlier in the process—all because we weren’t satisfied with email.”

2.4 Technology & Collaborative Communication Solutions

Social intranets are frequently brought up in discussions about email strategy, not only as a means of reducing email overload, but also a platform for two-way communication and workforce engagement, and a rich source for harvesting workforce feedback to guide the decision-making process of senior leaders.

Simple solutions like an aggregated weekly newsletter with short headlines and links to the full story on the intranet can reduce the number of emails. Also, as previously discussed, the subscription-based consumption of information offered through RSS, SharePoint team sites and collaboration platforms like Twitter, Yammer and Jive moves information sharing away from email (push) to a pull model, where workers subscribe to the information they want and need.

In Solving Email Overload With A Company-Wide Ban: Jon Orlin cites the “zero-email policy” of Atos, a large European tech firm. The Atos CEO reported that his company has been implementing new tools, notably collaboration and social networking platforms, which will replace email for internal communications within three years.

Many others have been advocating the move from email to other platforms as well, but social intranet adoption can be hampered by risk-averse corporate cultures, as previously noted. This topic is adequately discussed by On the Same Page Communication Consultant Dom Crincoli in Key Drivers of Social Intranet Adoption, and Six Variables of Social Intranet Adoption, where cultural factors like workforce engagement and senior leader buy-in can make all the difference.

Bill Boyd also comments on the Atos initiative, saying, “God is in the details, and it is interesting and important to consider what is involved in this plan. Obviously email itself is not going away entirely; they will still need it to communicate with external customers and stakeholders. And they will need a method to bridge external email and internal networking: if you want to forward a message from a client to a coworker, you will not want to start cutting and pasting, especially if the coworker needs to respond to the original sender,” he notes.

Chapter 3. A summary of actionable steps companies are taking to reduce email and information overload

In summary, there are a number of proven strategies for dealing with email overload, including technology and social media solutions offering the opportunity for total migration away from email. But organizations do well to tread carefully here, as with all change management initiatives. A true understanding of the root causes of email overload at an organization is required before
recommendations for a solution can be proposed. For example, the root cause of email overload may have little to do with a lack of content structure or inability to embrace new technologies, and much to do with corporate cultural factors such as risk aversion, where there is a compulsion to copy in an excessive number of colleagues in an effort cover one’s backside—as previously discussed in the context of emotional dependence on email.

The underlying cause and solutions to email overload are unique to every organization, and objective insights gained from an independent outside consultancy may prove to be indispensable in this regard. Communication consulting firms like On the Same Page are standing by, and can help you determine the best method for reducing email overload at your organization.

Further Reading

Jonathan Spira: Overload!: How Too Much Information Is Hazardous To Your Organization:  

An Email Fanatic's Guide to Organizing Your Inbox (helpful article offering tips on how to organize your email inbox, including directions for labeling incoming email):  
About On the Same Page

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Whether a client is in the midst of a merger, is transforming its operating model or needs to achieve higher employee engagement, we always start the process the same way: by listening. We get to know businesses and cultures intimately so we can uncover solutions that fit the particular work environment, support the company’s objectives and meet and exceed goals. Our services include:

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- Engagement strategies to enhance performance in safety, quality, productivity and customer service levels;
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- Training and coaching for leaders, managers and frontline supervisors;
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