



JOAG Tip of the Month

September 2019

Combatting Email Overload

"According to a July 2012 McKinsey Global Institute report on "the social economy", ...**the average knowledge worker now spends 28% of [his or] her work time managing email.**"¹

7,777 New Messages? Electronic mail has been both a gift and a curse to the modern workplace. While it creates a means for swift and flexible communication, it has also become a formidable intruder on our attention to more productive tasks. Arguably, it has become **the task** in some organizations. Author Peter Bregman articulated this idea beautifully to Fortune Magazine - "Email is such a seductress in terms of distraction because it poses as valid work".¹ So, although emails can be crucial for certain work tasks and collaboration, a point of excess does exist and can be difficult to identify by many professionals.

Why is this important? Opening an inbox to find an overwhelming number of irrelevant emails can be detrimental to employees. Studies have associated feelings of anxiety, loss of control, task fragmentation, and even email addiction with excessive receiving and sending of emails.² In contrast, a 2012 study also found lower heart rates in employees who took a five-day break from email.²

Nonetheless, email is here to stay. Consider a few tips for COPING WITH OVERLOAD (as a recipient), and AVOIDING OVERUSE (as a sender):

COPING WITH EMAIL OVERLOAD

1. Designate specific times to read and respond to emails

Checking emails two to four times each day may help to lower cumulative time associated with refocusing and task switching.

2. Close email program(s) completely when concentrating on important tasks

The small prompt at the bottom of a screen for each incoming email is indeed a distraction. When faced with the fear of missing a vital email, note that truly urgent events would likely warrant a phone call or in-person visit.

3. Respond to emails in some kind of order

Two examples of email order are chronological and priority-based. A combination of multiple approaches may be beneficial depending on the nature and amount of emails received.

AVOIDING EMAIL OVERUSE

1. Initiate phone calls for potentially lengthy conversations

Post-call, and if the discussion is significant to document, compose a summary email of the call and invite the other person(s) on the call to contribute and edit.

2. Reduce email length when possible

Provide relevant details and background, but limit messages to exactly what is pertinent to the recipient and emphasize the specific requested action(s) or information.

3. Don't go C-c-crazy

Carbon copy (Cc) appropriate parties only when necessary. Consider Cc'ing additional parties on closing emails of discussions if intended for informational purposes only.

References:

1. Vanderkam, Laura. "Stop Checking Your Email, Now." *Fortune*, 8 October 2012, <http://fortune.com/2012/10/08/stop-checking-your-email-now/>. Accessed 3 June 2019.

2. McMurtry, Kim. "Managing Email Overload in the Workplace." *Performance Improvement*, vol. 53, issue 7, 2014. pp 31-37, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pfi.21424>. Accessed 3 June 2019.