

When it comes to your email, just say no

BY MARVIN PROCTER

OK, maybe you can't really say no, but has it ever occurred to you that there may be ways to make your use of e-mail more effective, and safer?

Consider this: according to author Tim Burrell, professional workers spend an average of 40 percent of their day dealing with e-mail. Tim, along with Mike Song, wrote the book "The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your Email Before it Manages You" – a great guide that will revolutionize your inbox.

The average office worker processes approximately 20,000 e-mails per year, and upward of 33 percent of the time spent dealing with those e-mails is wasted.

What is the annual cost to business? It is estimated to be about \$300 billion annually, based on an e-mail user survey conducted by Cohesive Knowledge Solutions, a company specializing in e-mail productivity and training.

Capital One, the giant financial-services company, recently formed a "productivity team" to attack its e-mail inefficiencies. The team determined that the average Capital One worker spent up to three hours per day processing e-mail. The company launched an employee effectiveness training program – something they don't teach you in financial services school.

The results?

- E-mails sent decreased by 21 percent;
- Workers received about 10 percent fewer emails;
- They all learned when it is appropriate to use the "reply to all" feature.

Capital One says it is on track to save 11 days per year per employee.

In addition to lost productivity, many experts say that there is a gathering storm of potential legal problems for businesses in all those stored e-mails clogging up their file servers.

"E-mail is probably the biggest problem for companies because that's where they have most of their electronic information," says Barry Murphy, a senior analyst at Forrester Research, Inc., a research company based in Cambridge, Mass. Sprinkled through those e-mail messages is information companies could benefit from if they knew it was there – or information that could harm them if it fell into the wrong hands.

Duffy Swan, president of a large funeral services company in Albuquerque, once said, "It's not what I know that worries me; it's what I don't know that I don't know that worries me."

Duffy is the smartest person I know. So if Duffy is worried, then I am worried. E-mail is the primary corporate repository for all the information that you don't know that you don't know.

Murphy says the first logical step in protecting yourself is controlling the amount of e-mail. While it is imperative that organizations implement and enforce sound records management of e-mails and other electronic records, what if you just reduced the number of e-mails to manage?

Can you really control e-mail, you ask? Believe it or not, it is possible. It will require some training, for yourself and those on your e-mail list, but it can be done.

Did your mom ever tell you that to get a letter you must send a letter? For those of you in Generation Y, letters are paper things that take a few days to arrive in your inbox – er, mailbox.

Well, nowhere is it more true than in e-mail that sending messages breeds messages – at about a 65 percent return rate, in fact. That means for every five e-mail messages you send, you are going to generate somewhere around three replies. Don't you wish your financial investments produced that kind of return?

The first step in curbing e-mail abuse is to look at the reflection in your monitor. Are you sending too many needless e-mails? If so, you have yourself to thank for the return on your e-mail "investment."

When do you send e-mails that you want others to read, do you make sure they don't look like all the others you recipients are getting? If not, your messages are probably being deleted without as much as a glance.

"Today, people are looking for ways to ignore or delete messages without even reading them," says Nancy Flynn, executive director of the ePolicy Institute, a training and consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio, and author of "E-Mail Management: 50 Tips for Keeping Your Inbox Under Control." Your message must be as compelling as possible to get opened, read and acted upon."

Here are four steps to get you started:

Establish a corporate e-mail policy; Make sure employees know the permissible uses of e-mail, the retention policies and which messages to keep. Make sure the policy includes guidance on dealing with attachments and Web links. A good resource on policies is E-Mail Rules, a guide distributed by Iron Mountain.

Train workers on e-mail productivity: Teach them to compose concise, effective messages. Let them know it is OK to walk across the room and just have a conversation with someone.

Fight technology with technology: There are very effective, user-friendly e-mail management software programs on the market that will keep your server fine-tuned and your CEO out of jail.

Sometimes, you really can just say no to e-mail.

From the Executive's Desk

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