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E-mail users @ wit's end — send help

Taming the e-mail monster

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WORCESTER— Looking for office clutter? Forget your desk. Try your e-mail inbox.

As the number of e-mails shooting around computer networks expands, more workers are sagging under the burden of messages that range from junk to treasure.

The result is a productivity challenge for everyone from entry-level employees to chief executives. Just ask professional organizer Vanessa L. Epro of Worcester, who came upon a client with an e-mail inbox bulging with 1,500 messages.

"People really get paralyzed by it," she said of e-mail.

If it seems like there's more e-mail circulating than ever before, there is. The Framingham-based research group IDC said 1.1 trillion e-mails were sent out worldwide in 1998. This year, that load is forecast to grow to 22.3 trillion e-mails.

Some estimates suggest the average worker receives and sends about 130 e-mails a day. Spend just a few minutes reading and answering each of the "real" e-mails — those that aren't spam — and e-mail can soon fill hours of a workday.

E-mail overload can even overtake a worker's private life. A study done last year in England for computer maker Hewlett-Packard Co. concluded that many adults are gripped by an "infomania" addiction to their e-mail and text messages, an urge so powerful it drives them to check on e-mail even while on vacation.

Not that all that e-mailing is necessarily a good thing. A British psychiatry researcher for the same HP study suggested that the average worker's IQ drops 10 points in the face of ringing phones and incoming e-mails. That's more than twice the IQ plunge caused by marijuana use, HP reported.

Toni Ballard of Shrewsbury helped shift Berklee College of Music in Boston from paper press releases to e-mail versions in the late 1990s, when she worked for the school. Now, as a vocalist and freelance publicist whose projects include an April 8 benefit for the Worcester Center for Performing Arts, she juggles 50 to 75 incoming e-mails a day and large e-mail distribution lists of journalists, family and friends.

"If I have a deadline, if I have to write something, I'll check out my inbox to see if I have important stuff for a project I'm working on," Ms. Ballard said. "Business things obviously take priority."

Some of her incoming e-mails go into folders, but some less important messages, she admitted, may not get read for days.

"It's nice to be kept informed, but obviously, if you read it all the time, you'd never get anything done," she said.

Although e-mail has been around for years, certain events have pushed its use forward. U.S. senators and representatives were receiving modest amounts of e-mail, typically dozens or hundreds of messages per week, until December 1998, when former President Clinton's impeachment process started. People around the country suddenly began sending thousands of messages to their representatives.

E-mail became the fastest and most preferred form of written communication on Capitol Hill after a 2001 anthrax scare led to new security measures for letters and packages. Yet e-mail campaigns, in which organizers set up form letters that constituents can send to their senators and representatives, have also boosted e-mail burdens for lawmakers, who are

expected to be responsive.

"That's one click," Michael Mershon, spokesman for U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, said of e-mail campaigns. "But we don't respond with one click."

In fact, that's part of e-mail's problem, according to Cambridge-based consultant Stever Robbins. In a Harvard Business School publication, Mr. Robbins said senders used to carry the burden of writing, stamping and mailing letters. Now, with e-mail as easy as a "send" click, recipients bear the burden of communication.

And, oh, the burden. Peggy Duncan, the Atlanta-based author of "Conquer Email Overload with Better Habits, Etiquette, and Outlook Tips and Tricks," has collected more than two-dozen pet peeves about e-mail from her Web site and training sessions.

The biggest problem? People who send e-mail far and wide in an attempt to CYA, or cover your you-know-what.

"They still 'reply to all' when all do not have a need to know," Ms. Duncan said. "The only thing that people are smarter about is not using all caps (capital letters). But other than that, it's really all bad.

"One of the worst things is the subject line. I got an e-mail from a lady yesterday, and her subject line said, 'Hello from the desk of so-and-so.' Well, what is this message? What is this junk? The subject line needs to read like a newspaper headline."

It might seem that training would help. Workers, however, do not necessarily jump at training when it's available. University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, which has thousands of employees and e-mail users, offered a course on "virtual clutter" for workers — and only a handful of people showed up.

"They would always say how time management was difficult for them because there's a huge amount of e-mail they get," said Joanne Derr, associate vice chancellor of human resources at the medical school. But the virtual-clutter course "wasn't tremendously well attended," she said. "I think it's a vicious circle around people not having time to learn."

Ms. Epro, of EPRO Organizing, urges her clients to make time. The first step, she said, is to stop trying to handle e-mail all day long. Instead, Ms. Epro said, set defined times each day to tackle it. Sometimes, that means telling co-workers that they cannot expect an immediate response.

"You have to be upfront with people you deal with," Ms. Epro said. "Tell them you're going to be turning off your e-mail."

To manage incoming e-mails, Ms. Epro tells her clients to think SAFE:

- Sort** the e-mail;
- Act** on e-mail that needs immediate response;
- File** the e-mails with important information into folders, and then
- Erase** unnecessary e-mails.

Save only e-mails with information unavailable elsewhere, and purge folders once a year, Ms. Epro said. Respond to e-mails that can be handled in two minutes, but send more complicated tasks to a to-do list and let the sender know when to expect a response.

Katie Donovan of Stoneham, one of Ms. Epro's clients and Northeast sales manager of Waltham-based I Make News Automotive Services Group, said the SAFE method has helped simplify her e-mail management.

"I feel more productive," she said. "I feel like I'm controlling my e-mail now. I definitely feel like I can get in and out and control it."

But managing e-mail isn't just for recipients. It's for senders, too, and on that count, most of us are failing. The Creative Group, a specialized staffing services company based in Menlo Park, Calif., reported last year that advertising and marketing professionals told surveyors they are irked by large files and unwarranted messages. Some are so vexed they've stopped looking at e-mail.

"I've got a client I met with last week, and I told him a lot of times we communicate with e-mail," said Jessica George, a Creative Group senior account manager in Boston. "He said, 'Don't bother.'"

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