

Death by email – Survival strategies

With more than 31 billion e-mails being sent each and every day, it is hardly surprising that many people are beginning to feel completely overloaded by the sheer quantity of emails they receive. Alistair Schofield suggests a number of strategies to leave you in control.

Love it or loath it, email is here to stay. According to the International Data Corporation, the current volume of 31 billion e-mails sent each day is set to more than double over the next 2 years.

For many organisations, e-mail is now the preferred means of communication, having replaced the memo, overtaken the telephone and made the fax machine virtually redundant. Sadly, in some cases, it is even replacing face-to-face conversations, with the number of stories of people who sit a few feet apart sending each other emails becoming ever more common.

However, the problem with email is not that it has replaced other means of communication, but that it has caused an explosion in the volume of communication. Whereas the marginal costs associated with the telephone and the post acted as a restraint on those mediums, no such metrics apply to e-mails where the cost of sending 1 or 1m emails is virtually the same. A quick search on the Internet will reveal numerous companies willing to sell you bulk mailing lists for relatively small sums. As an example, for £80, bulkleads4sale.com will sell you a mailing list containing 20m email addresses!

While the preponderance of emails selling Viagra is undoubtedly a problem, both the anti-spam technology and legislation are starting to catch up. Where these forms of prevention cannot help, is with the problem of 'internal spam'. This arises when people send unnecessary emails, copy people in, broadcast information rather than targeting it on a need to know basis and, worst of all, use the 'MAIL ALL' option to announce the date of their leaving party. In my mind, this latter form of spam is unforgivable and is tantamount to corporate vandalism.

What then can be done to both reduce the problem and to sort the 'wheat from the chaff'?

1. Timed delivery

One of my biggest 'bug bears' when I worked for an insurance company was that emails were delivered the instant they were sent. With most of our employees having desk-based jobs, this meant that the bleeps from the computer alerting them to the fact that a new email had arrived served as a constant source of disruption that I believed was costing us literally hundreds of thousands of pounds each year in lost productivity.

Why is it that whereas the post gets delivered once or twice a day, email is seen as something that should be delivered instantly?



The solution to this is simple: a) Ask the IT department set up the servers to deliver email only at set times; b) switch off the alert noise on your computer so that you are not distracted or c) set up your email system to work off-line and to only synchronise once every few hours.

2. Set up rules

Most email systems allow users to automatically file or colour code emails depending on a range of criteria. For example, you might like to highlight emails from your boss in red, or ones from your direct reports in another colour.

I use this function to automatically divert emails which I am copied in on to a separate folder. In this way, I keep a copy in case I ever need it, but otherwise never look at them. My reasoning is that if it is important for me to read it, the sender would have sent it 'to' me. Interestingly, in all the years that I have been doing this, I have never once needed to look at any of those emails!

In case you are wondering, to do this in Outlook, click on the 'Organise' button on the toolbar.



If you get copied in on a lot of emails, you might also like to use the automatic reply feature to send a standard email to the originator telling them that you do not generally read emails that you are copied in on and therefore, if it is important that you see it, could they please resend it with a covering note summarising why it is important.

3. Holidays

If you receive a lot of emails, returning from holiday to a full inbox is no fun. My suggestion therefore is that

you set up a rule to divert all mail received while you are away to a separate folder and leave an 'out of office' reply message asking people to resend items after your return if they are important.

In this way you will receive the information but be able to separate the task of sifting through it from your current email.

4. Multiple addresses

In the same way as you can use the functions of your email system to file or colour code your emails on the basis of who they are from, you can also sort them on the basis of who they are to.

Therefore, why not ask your IT department to provide you with a separate email address to give to customers. Highlighting these emails would then provide a simple way of drawing your attention to the most important emails first.



By way of an example, I know of one very senior businessman who does this. He has a separate email address that is completely anonymous in that it is simply a sequence of numbers. He only gives this out to trusted friends and senior customers and, as a result, he is able to very quickly identify the emails he responds to first.

4. Reply to all unwanted emails

The temptation with unwanted emails is to simply delete them. But that does nothing to address the problem. Instead I would urge you to politely reply to the sender thanking them for sending it to you but pointing out that you didn't need to see it. If you encourage your colleagues to do the same, the hope is that the originators will eventually be so swamped with 'thanks-but-no-thanks' responses that the penny will drop.

5. Use news feed services

News feeds work a bit like a bespoke newspaper. They allow you to choose the information you require and pull it together in one place without having to give out your email address or be interrupted by numerous email newsletters.

There are numerous services to choose from but the one I use is Bloglines (www.bloglines.com). When you visit web sites, look out for a little orange box that looks like this  or like this .

These indicate that the site provides a news feed service. Clicking on them will give you the link you require to add them into your news service. Most of the large organisations now offer this as an alternative to newsletters. For example, the BBC, Harvard Business School and of course Extensor.

The big benefit of these services is that they are 'demand pull' rather than 'supply push' – you ask for the information you want rather than being sent everything and having to delete the bits you don't want.

For this reason, I believe that news feed technology should be used internally within organisations as an alternative to email or printed newsletters.

Creating news feeds is extremely easy. There are a variety of low cost and easy to use tools available to assist you. The one we use at Extensor is a product called FeedForAll (www.feedforall.com).

6. Prevention is better than cure

The main way in which spammers get hold of your email address is through the use of 'spam bots'. These are software programmes that continually download web pages looking for anything that looks like an email address. When they find one, they copy it to their files and carry on searching. In this way they are able to create lists containing literally millions of addresses.

The simple solution to beat the spam bots is to encrypt any email addresses on your site. This is not difficult and there are plenty of free programmes available on the Internet to enable you to do it – for example, 'Enkoder' from Hiveware. If you have an email address that appears on your organisation's web site, check with the IT department to ensure that it is encrypted.

But is the deluge of emails so bad?

Despite its place at the heart of our organisations, email has become a source of great annoyance for many people. Mention the word in a pub and you will have people queuing up to regale you with stories of how many hundreds of emails they had when they returned from holiday or how spam is crippling their computer systems. But compared with other forms of communication, is it really so bad?

On an average day around 80% of the post I receive is 'junk mail'. Because the envelopes rarely give any indication as to the content, I have to open each item to ascertain whether it is important or not before placing the majority in the recycling box. Also on an average day I receive many more emails than items of post and the ratio of junk emails is far higher yet, unlike most people I know, I really don't mind.

I have come to the conclusion that dealing with junk email takes a lot less of my time than dealing with the post and that it is a lot better for the environment. Moreover, by using an appropriate spam filter, much of the work of separating the important items from the rest is done for me and the few minutes I spend each day browsing through and deleting the spam inbox occasionally turns up items of interest.

I attribute the change in my attitude towards email to the fact that I have found a way of effectively managing it. For this reason, when I do look at the items that are colour coded 'low importance' or look through the spam, I am rarely disappointed as my expectations are already low.

My philosophy for email is therefore;

- (i) Manage it, don't let it manage you, and
- (ii) Set low expectations and you may be pleasantly surprised.

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