

Efficiency - Surviving the Office Email Nightmare

Anyone thirty five years or older can probably still remember office life without email. Over forty five and maybe you can also remember the days before the facsimile machine dominated inter-office communications, although back then might be just a blur.

Our communications have changed in the last few decades, from total reliance on the postal network to a reliance on electronic media in various forms, to the point that electronic mail, or punchy email for short, is the fundamental basis around which office life revolves.

Statistics vary, as always, but estimates suggest in excess of five trillion business email messages were sent in 2006. That's about fifteen billion messages per day on average and a significant proportion of those emails are sent to people in the same organisation and often the same location; which includes those we can see across the office if we feel brave enough to look!

A recent study by academics at Glasgow and Paisley universities revealed some interesting findings when looking at use of business email. Their survey revealed that one third of study participants found email stressful. The study revealed the intrusive and disruptive nature of business email, and shockingly, found some email users looking at their inbox up to forty times an hour.

Most office workers spend a material amount of time addressing email, and that time seems to increase the more you rise up the ladder and people start to email you. This is where it gets worrying for organisations, because if each worker loses 15 minutes per day through email inefficiency, that amounts to nearly £1million annually in misdirected salaries for a company with one thousand average salary employees.

But why have we got to where we are and just what is it about email that has made us so reliant as to be near, or on the verge of, total dependency? And if there are any doubts as to that dependency take a look around the office when the email system goes down, you will generally see workflow grind to a halt, because we need email and can't function without it!

But it wasn't always like that. Email was developed as in the early 1970's to allow the transmission of messages across university and military networks in the United States. It spread far and wide over the next decade leading to the creation of the better known networks in the mid 1980s, including America Online (AOL)

But the widespread use of email in business is a much more recent phenomenon for most of us, with a steady introduction of the email capability across offices from 1995 onwards.

Email is fast, efficient and effective as a means of communicating information across widely dispersed networks. But it has a dark side, because it is easy, accessible and cheap. Its use has been encouraged by business encouraged by the efficiency it offers. But what happens to that efficiency if workers become deluged in incoming emails or angry and frustrated because their ability to operate is controlled by the computer and not themselves.

Emails attraction, its ease of access, is also its downfall; after all how many of use sit outside the post room waiting for mail, or congregate around the fax waiting for the peep. The problem is with fax and post the incoming might not be for us, but with emails every ping means somebody (may) want you. In other words it becomes addictive and then its hard to get away, we yearn for the little envelope and hanker after the ping.