

PRODUCTIVITY

SLAVES TO EMAIL

People don't use email, research shows, email uses people. As a result, we're far less efficient than we could be. But the finger is being pointed not at spam but at the culture of business communication. **Report: Jessica Gardner**

● Many workers spend more than two hours, or 25 per cent of an eight-hour day, on email, according to research by Inbox Alliance.

Co-founder of the research firm Alistair Gordon says we are turning into email slaves and that productivity is slumping as a result. "The number one conclusion that the [worldwide] research comes to is that people don't use email, email uses people," he says. "Most people are not in control of their electronic communication and they react to it in a slave-like fashion."

Although most owners of bulging inboxes would point the finger at unwanted spam, he says the corporate communication culture is to blame.

Data from a pilot research program undertaken by Inbox Alliance found that in larger organisations less than 9 per cent of email is spam, while about two-thirds of email communication comes from within an organisation – from superiors, direct reports and internal agencies (such as HR or IT).

"When people say they can't fix the problem, they're imagining a million people sending emails but in reality it's quite a limited number of people who send most of it," Gordon says. If firms could change the behaviour of their staff, eliminating unnecessary ccs and discouraging one line "Thanks" or "OK"

Trapped: Most people check their inboxes continuously throughout the day



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Alistair Gordon,
Inbox Alliance



messages as two examples, the problem of too many emails would be easier to fix, he says.

"I don't think senior executives realise how much time people spend checking their email," he says.

The majority, 80 per cent, check their inbox continuously throughout the day and this is disastrous, he says. "People typically respond to an email in a matter of six seconds on average after it arrives," he says. "They hear the noise or see the box flash up, stop doing what they're doing and immediately respond. They haven't thought whether it's more important than what they're doing now ... which is a ridiculous practice."

Unfortunately for those looking for some simple tips and tricks to keep their inboxes slimmer in the new year, Gordon suggests that, just as with dieting, bad habits creep back. However, he says there are a few must-dos.

"The first policy setting I would make in the new year would be to turn off new email alerts," he says. "That's the number one productivity gain."

He suggests allocating hourly or two hourly time slots for checking and responding to email.

That useful one-touch strategy for dealing with paperwork should be applied to emails, too, he says. Internet forums suggest a triage system, similar to that in an emergency waiting room, where you either do, delete, delegate or defer an email.

When filing emails, he says "having lots of folders is a bad idea because you can't remember which folder to look in." Instead he suggests only a few broadly categorised folders to make future searches simpler.

Finally, an attachment that will be needed in future should be saved to the hard drive immediately. That way when you need to access it, you are not distracted by lurking unread emails as you revisit your inbox – outside your scheduled checking time! **BRW**

HOW TO KEEP YOUR INBOX UNDER CONTROL

- Turn off email alerts.
- Check and respond to email only a few times during the day, at regular scheduled intervals.
- Use calendar alerts to remind you of those times.

When checking, take one of the following four options:

- Delete. (If it contains information you don't need to refer to again. Be ruthless.)
- Do. (If it can be

responded to quickly.)

- Delegate. (Forward to someone else with a quick message.)
- Defer. (Use inbox follow-up tools.) When responding to emails, go straight to the follow-up folder. Follow-up flags

can be colour-coded or set with reminders in many email programs.

Do unto others:

- Write clear and succinct subject lines that assist in passing on information.
- Forget the OK or thanks emails.
- Use rules that divert emails from regular senders (such as newsletters) into their own folders.
- Consider phoning for tasks such as making appointments, saving a string of emails.

Source: Inbox Alliance and BRW