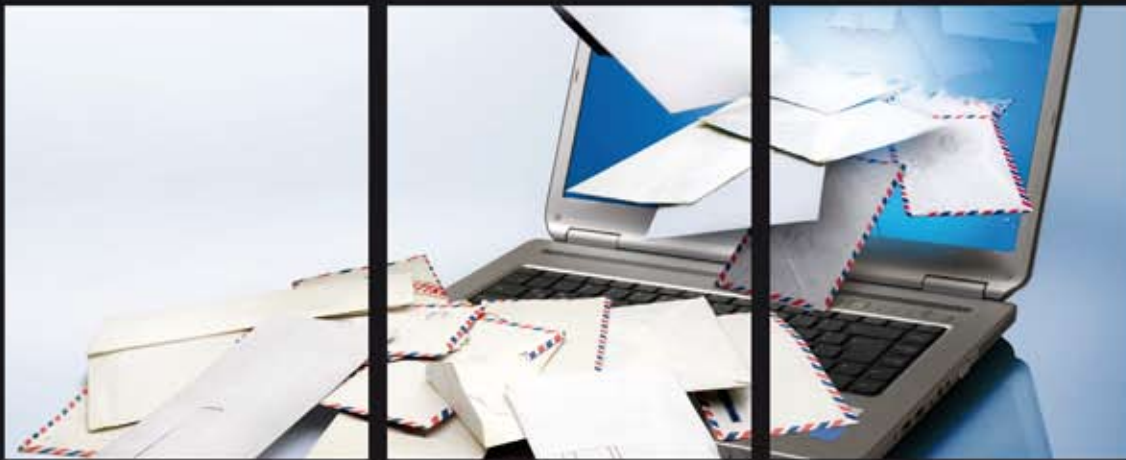


The E-mail Optimisation Toolkit

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Chapter 1: Stage one – Identifying what other organisations have tried in the past

‘No e-mail day’

With many inboxes bulging with messages and workers dreading the daily deluge of e-mail, some companies have taken drastic action to alleviate the problem. There is a long line of companies that have tried a so-called ‘no e-mail day’, including Intel, Nestlé, Veritas Software (now part of Symantec), U.S. Cellular and Deloitte & Touche.

On the no e-mail day employees are encouraged to revert to more old-fashioned means of communication. In some organisations this is strictly enforced and the penalty for sending an e-mail on a no e-mail day is a US\$1 fine per e-mail sent. This actually happened to a lady working in the marketing department at Veritas Software. She didn’t realise the ban was in place and ran up a US\$80 fine. However, other organisations do not take such a draconian approach and put more emphasis on encouraging staff to talk to each other face-to-face or pick up the phone rather than rely on e-mail. For Intel, the push to revisit the culture of e-mail followed a comment by the company’s chief executive, who criticised engineers “who sit two cubicles apart sending an email rather than get up and talk”.

Organisations have been experimenting with no e-mail days for some time and there are some reports that they have reaped the benefits of shutting down their inboxes for one day a week. In 2007, fulfilment organisation PBD launched a no e-mail Friday, after the chief executive suspected that

over-dependence on e-mail was damaging productivity. Four months later, the company felt the trial had been a resounding success, resulting in “better teamwork, happier customers and quicker problem solving”.¹

However, not everyone is convinced that moving away from e-mail is the way to resolve stress and lack of productivity in the office. “Instead of bringing e-mail to a grinding halt at the end of the week – which of course just means that most of Monday is wasted catching up – companies need to educate their staff on the appropriate use and management of e-mail,” said Alan Elliot, director of business development at e-mail specialists Mirapoint. “Depicting e-mail as some kind of resource-draining monster that we’d all be better off without wilfully ignores the realities of the modern business world,” he said.²

Although the no e-mail day approach has brought mixed results, the concept does provide both the employee and employer the opportunity to reflect on how they currently use e-mail and how they could become more efficient and effective. The no e-mail day does enable the employee to experience a working day without e-mail and understand how it affects his or her productivity. To that end the approach is quite useful, but it does not tackle the root cause of the problems which need to be identified for specific organisations and then managed.

Banning all internal e-mail

Over the years there have been some drastic actions taken in the attempt to regain

control of e-mail communication. In the UK in 2003, John Caudwell, owner of high street retailer Phones 4u, banned staff from using e-mail. Caudwell, who does not use e-mail, told more than 2,500 employees not to use e-mail to communicate within the company. Instead, they had to rely on face-to-face conversations or use the phone to communicate with colleagues.

"I saw that e-mail was insidiously invading Phones 4u so I banned it immediately," Caudwell said. He also said that the ban brought an instant, dramatic and positive effect, as his staff were showing signs of being constrained by the proliferation of e-mails. "The quality and efficiency of communication have been increased tremendously in one fell swoop; things are getting done and people aren't tied to their PCs". Caudwell estimated the ban would save his company at least £1m a month in staff time, and the biggest benefit from the ban would be increased customer loyalty as staff can then focus on providing a better service. Caudwell claimed: "The net result is that the business has been dramatically liberated, leaving the typical Phones 4u person with an extra three hours a day to concentrate fully and without distraction on sales and customer service."³

Since the ban in 2003, Phones 4u has reinstated the use of internal e-mail. The reasons behind doing so are unreported. However, in this day and age trying to run a business without e-mail communication is likely to cost more than having it in place. It is known that the telephone is less efficient than e-mail communication, as will be discussed in the section on 'Interruption recovery time and task overload' (see p11).

Charging for e-mail

Charging for sending e-mails has normally been associated with the no e-mail day

where if you send an e-mail on the no e-mail day, you will be fined, as mentioned earlier. However, charging for e-mail once you have sent more than your quota dates back to the late 1980s. A organisation called Prodigy Communications Corporation was an online service, aimed at households, which offered its subscribers access to a range of networked services, including news, weather, shopping, bulletin boards, games, polls, expert columns, banking, stocks, travel, and so on.⁴ Herb Rothman was one of the first to sign up for Prodigy when it was introduced in 1988 – but he was also one of the first to be kicked off as an organiser of a protest against new e-mail charges. Prodigy subscribers were asked to pay 25 cents for every message they sent over a monthly free quota of 30. "We are an information service," said a Prodigy spokesman. "We are not an e-mail service."

Prodigy said that its pricing for unlimited non-e-mail use was based on the premise that people would use the service for shopping. "Every time you use the service to buy a holiday gift, book an airline ticket, pay a bill, trade a stock, send flowers or buy stamps, you are helping to assure the continuation of a flat, unmetered fee, because advertisers pay a fee for each purchase and inquiry," Prodigy said in a message to users. Prodigy decided to start charging for e-mail because 20 per cent of the users were sending 90 per cent of the e-mail messages, costing the company millions of dollars for extra computer equipment and workers to manage mail traffic growing 20 per cent per month. Prodigy thought that households would use e-mail like long-distance phone calls, only sending a small number each month.

Although this is a case study of an organisation in the late 1980s, e-mail communication has not really changed.

E-mail usage continues to astound us, with more e-mail being sent daily and its use morphing over a period of time. In this case the e-mail system has moved from solely business use to a mixture of business and non-business use. In the Prodigy Communications Corporation, the expectation was that the service would be used for shopping and solely for shopping, as that was how Prodigy Communications Corporation would make money. Organisations today operate on similar logic, and that is that e-mail should be used for businesses purposes. The management strategy for Prodigy was to introduce a charge for every e-mail sent over quota. By doing this Prodigy only ensured that the cost of managing e-mail would remain fixed. The strategy did not consider its main business, which was shopping. The quota of 30 e-mails did not guarantee that the e-mails sent would be used purely for shopping purposes. However, paying for sending e-mail is an interesting strategy that will be explored further in the next section.

Playing a game

Byron Reeves, a communications professor at Stanford in the US, took an innovative approach to solving the problem of e-mail overload: turning corporate e-mail into a game. From studying the popular online game 'World of Warcraft', Reeves saw that players placed great value on the game's artificial currency of gold pieces, spending hours on quests and tasks to earn it. Reeves came up with the idea of a system where users could earn virtual currency through intelligent use of e-mail.⁵

A system was built where employees were given virtual tokens, say 100 a week, that they could attach to an e-mail they wrote. The more tokens attached to an e-mail, the higher it would pop up in the

recipient's inbox. Reeves anticipated that this would encourage people to use few e-mails, meaning that their tokens could be saved for important e-mails to give them a greater chance of being read. According to Reeves, the system did work. When a group at IBM tested the system, they found that messages with 20 tokens attached were 52 per cent more likely to be opened quickly than normal. The study showed that e-mail overload ceased to be a problem. "What we've proven is that games can change behavior," said Reeves.⁶ Whilst videogames are traditionally thought of as frivolous activities, this study showed that transplanting certain design principles to everyday tasks can have a clear impact on productivity.

Although Reeves claimed the e-mails with tokens attached were more quickly opened compared to normal, the norm is now that the majority of new e-mails are reacted to within six seconds of arriving. Reeves' approach does not add anything new to employees reacting to e-mail, but it does help the sender consider the importance of e-mail by forcing them to prioritise according to an e-mail's importance. However, what the sender considers important might be very different to what the recipient considers important. The gaming strategy does help in changing users' behaviour, from a sender considering what deserves tokens to the recipients prioritising incoming e-mail.

Additional e-mail system: Short messaging service

A new communication format was introduced for computer users at the Danwood Group in the UK. At the time of the study in 2000, it had over 500 employees based at 19 locations throughout the UK. The organisation had introduced e-mail in 1998 and after a couple of years of monitoring its effectiveness, it wanted to

help employees become more efficient. The management wanted to reduce the amount of time employees spent on e-mail and, by introducing the new tool, to make e-mail use more structured.

The idea of the additional e-mail tool came from the concept used by mobile phone organisations called Short Messaging Service (SMS, now known as texting). The e-mail SMS application was developed as an add-on for Outlook 2000 using the development features available within Outlook 2000 and Visual Basic for Applications (VBA). The Outlook 2000 add-on, as shown in Figure 1, gave the Danwood Group employees the ability to send a short message as an alternative to a traditional e-mail message. The e-mail tool enabled employees to send short messages without having to include all the pleasantries and allowed them to get straight to the point without feeling guilty about the directness of the message.

The feedback from the users was good, with all of them saying they found the SMS add-on useful. The majority (80 per cent) of users claimed the SMS add-on was quicker to use than the traditional e-mail system, with 40 per cent of the users saying that the message box that is used to display and create a message saved them time. However, 80 per cent of the users said that they still preferred to use the traditional e-mail messaging system

to send messages. When the employees were verbally questioned about the SMS application the majority thought the system saved them time writing e-mails, but more of their time was spent on deciding what the content of the one-line message should be, due to the restricted space. The employees also commented on how quick it was to be able to directly read the one-line SMS e-mail from their inbox without having to open the e-mail message to see the content. The general consensus was that the one-line e-mail was more structured than a traditional e-mail, which made replying easier. The results showed that on average an employee sent three SMS e-mails a day and there was no significant decrease in traditional e-mail usage. The overall effect of the extra SMS communication on other communication media was not measured, but like previous attempts to improve e-mail communication, the system has helped employees to think about what they are sending to recipients.

E-mailing the senders to solve the problem

A number of organisations have tried e-mailing their employees with tips on how to become more effective and efficient e-mailers. The e-mail tips are normally sent out weekly and focus on areas for improvement. In an attempt to reduce the amount of e-mail traffic, British Airways launched a daily e-mail with the clever

headline 'Thousands buried in e-quake'. The e-mail contained information on how the volume of e-mail could be reduced by considering who the e-mail should be sent to, for example, whether the sender

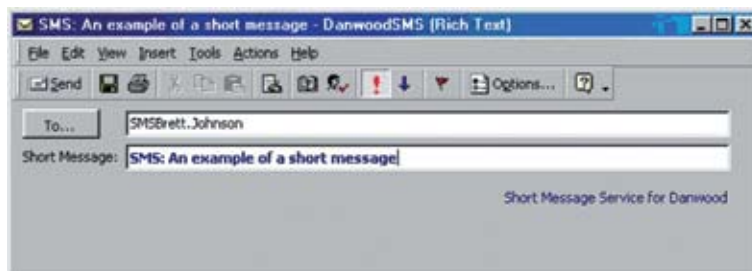


Figure 1: The e-mail SMS compose form

really had to cc (carbon copy) his or her boss and the boss of the recipient. The tips worked for a time, as British Airways noticed a reduction in the volume of e-mail. However, within a short period of time the volume slowly started to increase. The healthcare giant 3M also sent tips out by e-mail and the net effect was very similar to British Airways. The senders went back to their old habits and the volume of e-mail increased. 3M, however, tried something very different: after removing the reply-to-all button in its e-mail application, the organisation noticed an 11 per cent decrease in the overall volume of e-mail traffic. This novel approach certainly got the result it wanted, but it was unclear what the side effects might have been, such as taking extra time to copy and paste the 'To' and 'Cc' fields when wanting to compose a reply-to-all e-mail.

What can be learnt from these approaches?

The important question is what can be learnt from the different approaches taken by the organisations. Many of these organisations have started from an anecdotal viewpoint: they know there is a problem with e-mail communication within their organisation, but they have not identified what the real underlying problem is. Starting from this viewpoint, it is hard to evaluate the impact the approach has had on the organisation and its employees. The organisational approaches have ranged from being relatively inexpensive to implement, for example, the no e-mail day, to building an application to change the behaviour of employees, for example e-mail tokens and e-mail SMS. The kneejerk reaction is hard to justify both logically and financially when it comes to developing software to tackle the problem. For an approach to be

effective, there are three phases that have to be addressed before any implementation of a solution. The first phase is the pre-assessment as shown in Figure 2.

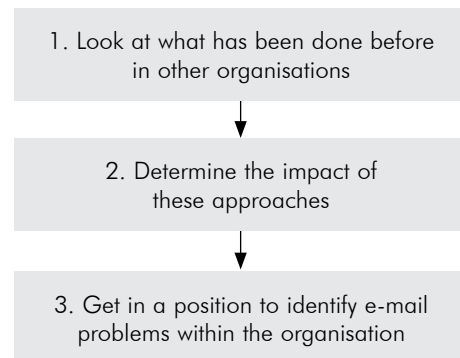


Figure 2: The stages contained within the pre-assessment phase

This chapter has discussed approaches that organisations have taken to tackle the e-mail communication problem and partly addresses stage one. The following chapter reviews the impact e-mail communication has had on both employees and employers. By knowing what the impacts are and the effects they can have on employees and employers, we will address stage two. The third stage will be addressed in Chapter 3.

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