

It's time to junk email from your worklife

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It's time to junk email!

Email has invaded our lives and another communication revolution is nigh.

Email has invaded our lives, cutting a cunning and sinister swath through our productivity and preying on emotional drivers created back in our youth through birthday cards containing money.

It is like the friendly stranger in movies, the one that seemed so nice and normal that you invited them to stay. Then you couldn't get rid of them; they ate all your food, borrowed your car, traumatised the family cat and generally made your life a misery.

We didn't see it coming. It all seemed so perfect. We could communicate in real time, go right to people's screens and send a message without wasting time on small talk. We could push the send -button and cross it off the list.

What's more, it fed our hardwired excitement about receiving mail. And no waiting for the postman to deliver grandma's special card! All day we had mail. Just for us. What could it be? Who will it be? How very exciting.

And we had to answer it. It was good manners. If someone makes contact, it is just courteous to reply. That's what our mums taught us.

At first it was a wonderful wave of mail, a gentle surge that bobbed and flowed and hummed. Then it swelled to a high tide — a bit harder to manage but compelling and pleasantly challenging nonetheless. And then came the tsunami — a wave of email so large and unrelenting that we couldn't ride it, fight it or outrun it. Suddenly email was drowning us in a sea of largely banal communication.

The practical result is a total loss of control over our time and a terrible choice between ignoring people or spending a ludicrous proportion of the day replying to an ever-growing inflow of -requests. This is how it happened:

The loss of traditional communication filters:

In the pre-email days, most communications were filtered through executive assistants, switchboard operators and mailroom people. Between cost cutting and a belief that electronic communication had deemed most of this unnecessary, all but the very senior executives lost their filter people. A study by the Roosevelt Institute, a liberal US think tank, found that 925,000 jobs were lost in "office and administrative support" occupations between 2009 and 2011 in the US.

The result is a lot of very highly paid executives spending a lot of their day doing work that used to cost \$25 an hour.

Sheer volume of inflow:

For many roles, particularly in large organisations or in areas like media or marketing, it is not uncommon to receive hundreds of emails a day. And the longer you stay in a job, the larger the inflow is likely to become. You pretty much need to change jobs every couple of years to avoid drowning. If you take email seriously, you totally lose control of your day. And 80 per cent to 90 per cent of it may well be a low priority if you had the power to prioritise it.

Socialising our email addresses:

If we give out business cards, book a hotel, enter a competition at a trade show or email enough people with our details in the email signature, it is a fair bet that our email address has become part of the trade in email addresses and databases. Suddenly you are getting unsolicited email, newsletters and all manner of offers. It is not unusual to unsubscribe 10-20 times a week from things you never subscribed to in the first place. It all takes time.

Chronic collegiality:

Then there is the dreaded “Cc” emails. We are all guilty of them — copying lots of people in as a courtesy when mostly people who are copied in rather than in the main batch have no need for the email. But it ticks a box around making sure people are informed and backs are covered. And it sucks the productivity from multiple people.

So where does this all go? Already some people are putting their out-of-office messages on all the time to warn they are not checking emails all day and may not respond to everything.

I suspect we will need to develop new types of communication that serve the email purpose without the chronic side effects. Perhaps we need an invited circle of instant-message contacts that we trust to only communicate necessary things in real time. If anyone breached this trust we could unfriend them.

Other mail might have to go through new types of filtering with improved means to differentiate genuine communication from spam-style cold calls. Perhaps organisations will need to wall personal email and capture all -incoming office mail in a central filter before it eats into the -productivity of high-paid staff.

I have no doubt the current ludicrous email flood cannot be allowed to further swamp our working lives and destroy our prioritisation and efficiency models. Another communication revolution is nigh. Please.