

MANAGING E-MAIL OVERLOAD: REDUCING VOLUME BY BEING MINDFUL OF OTHERS

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As Abraham Lincoln once said, “[a] lawyer’s time and advice are his stock in trade.” Sadly, in this electronic world, email quickly eats into the time we have each day to earn a living. The first step in staying focused on billable work and not on email is to reduce email volume. Luckily, I have nine tips for helping you tame email overload:

1. Repeat after me: “My email habits impact others.” A Microsoft study from a few years ago found that it takes a worker on average 15 minutes to return to productive work after being distracted by a phone call or email. While 15 minutes seems extreme, it is easy to envision that every joke, cute video link, and funny picture which you forward by email to a co-worker will take them 1-5 minutes of time to read/view and return back to productive work. Take that 1-5 minutes of “wasted time” and multiply it by the number of co-workers you forwarded the email to...the total impact on business can be shocking. The reality is that forwarding funny e-mails to co-workers let’s them know it is OK to forward them to you (resulting in more email for you to process and review). Do yourself a favor—quit forwarding junk emails to others in your office at their work email addresses.



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2. We all have “home” and “work” email accounts. So does everyone in our offices. We need to ALL remember to only use our work email addresses for work purposes, forwarding anything non-work (including the aforementioned “joke, cute video link, and funny picture” emails) to your home email account. Doing so is really easy, just politely remind the next person that emails you such an email that you prefer to read emails like that at home, in your free time, and provide them with your home email address. Trust me, they quickly



catch on. Another approach is to address the issue in your office’s computer use policy; reminding employees that they have no expectation of privacy in their work email accounts and that you expect them to utilize their home email accounts for all personal emails.

3. When you do receive non-work email at your work email account from your friends/family, don’t read it. Instead, forward it home and deal with it later. Plus, when you respond to the email, you’ll be responding from your home email address.

4. Next, for every other legitimate email you are receiving at work that you don’t have an ethical or business reason to read, you need to forward it to your home email address. Then, for each of those sources of emails, you need to spend time updating your email address with them, changing it from work to home. While you are at it, consider unsubscribing from newsletters you aren’t really reading.

5. Even legitimate emails can be huge time wasters. We all need to remember that “reply to all” should never be our default. Instead, we should always ask, “Does each of these people really need to read my reply?” If the answer is “no,” then delete the email addresses from the reply of anyone that doesn’t need to know. Every time you do that, you’ve save someone else at least a minute of productivity.

6. Lawyers like to talk. Couple that with the fact that we are trained to be accurate, never failing to mention every last possible exception that can happen and you have a potential for email disaster. All of us need to do a better job of writing shorter email replies. Do we really need to type out every possible exception? Can we cut to the chase, make

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our point and remind the reader that he can follow up with any questions?

Venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki had a blog post (*Ten Things to Learn This School Year*) a few years ago in which he discussed the art of writing a two-minute response to an email. The technique is simple, “All you should do is explain who you are, what you want, why you should get it, and when you need it by.” It’s a great lesson for lawyers.

7. Find out if your Internet Service Provider (ISP) offers spam filtering and whether it is enabled. While your ISP can block more than 90 percent of the spam you receive (if you let them), you need to know and understand how and what they filter. My previous ISP had a policy whereby by default all filtered spam was automatically deleted. As you can imagine, that is a truly frightening prospect for a law firm. By logging onto the administrative account with your ISP, you can usually change settings regarding how long spam is kept, as

well as how the server-side spam filter settings are.

8. Your email client (e.g., Outlook) usually has spam settings that are adjustable as well. For instance, in Outlook you can change how tight/loose the settings are, as well as tagging particular behavior as being suspicious (e.g., presume all email with a return email address top level domain of ru (Russia) is spam). Most email clients are “smart,” learning from the email you flag as spam and updating filters on the fly. Thus, there can be tremendous benefit to you in understanding how to flag spam as “spam” instead of merely deleting it. If you are having a severe problem with spam, you can also consider installing the open source (free) anti-spam plugin (works with most email clients) called “SpamBayes.” However you choose to filter spam, do not forget that you have a duty to review what was tagged as spam to make sure that legitimate mail (such as email from the court) was not flagged as spam.

9. We’ve all been taught that the “unsubscribe” link in spam is a way

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that spammers determine whether an email address is valid, and that clicking the “unsubscribe” link is pure folly. Depending on the type of spam, I completely disagree. Most spam for “legal products/services” is sent by legitimate vendors (albeit using a tacky marketing tactic). A legitimate vendor isn’t sending out millions of spam emails fishing for valid email addresses, nor are they interested in violating the CAN-SPAM Act, and thus, you really shouldn’t be afraid of their “unsubscribe” link. However, if the spam is trying to sell you a Rolex watch... I would stay

away from the “unsubscribe” link.

While Lincoln never had to deal with email, his words are something we should remember that everything we can do to have more time (and less stress) at work, the more “stock in trade” we have to sell.

About the Author

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