

You've got (too much) mail

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Introduction

Welcome to the age of information overload

Of all the tools we use in the modern office, few are the double-edged sword that e-mail has become. Once a method for quick and easy communication, e-mail has evolved into a time-consuming—but necessary—evil in today's workplace. In fact, the average user spends over 30% of his day creating, organizing, reading and responding to e-mail.

But it's not just overflowing inboxes that vex today's knowledge worker. Blogs and RSS feeds keep you constantly connected to the world at large. Social groups such as Facebook and LinkedIn keep you continually networking. Then there's the actual work you have to do. In fact, on average, you start doing something new every three minutes.

This is more than a busy day. This is information overload.

PC Magazine defines *information overload* as "too much information for one human being to absorb in an expanding world of people and technology. It comes from all sources including TV, newspapers and magazines as well as wanted and unwanted regular mail, e-mail and faxes."

Luckily, there's a new surge of interest in overcoming the e-mail avalanche and better equipping workers to handle this surplus of communication. From improved workplace practices to new communications tools, the e-mail mountain might just become a mole hill again.



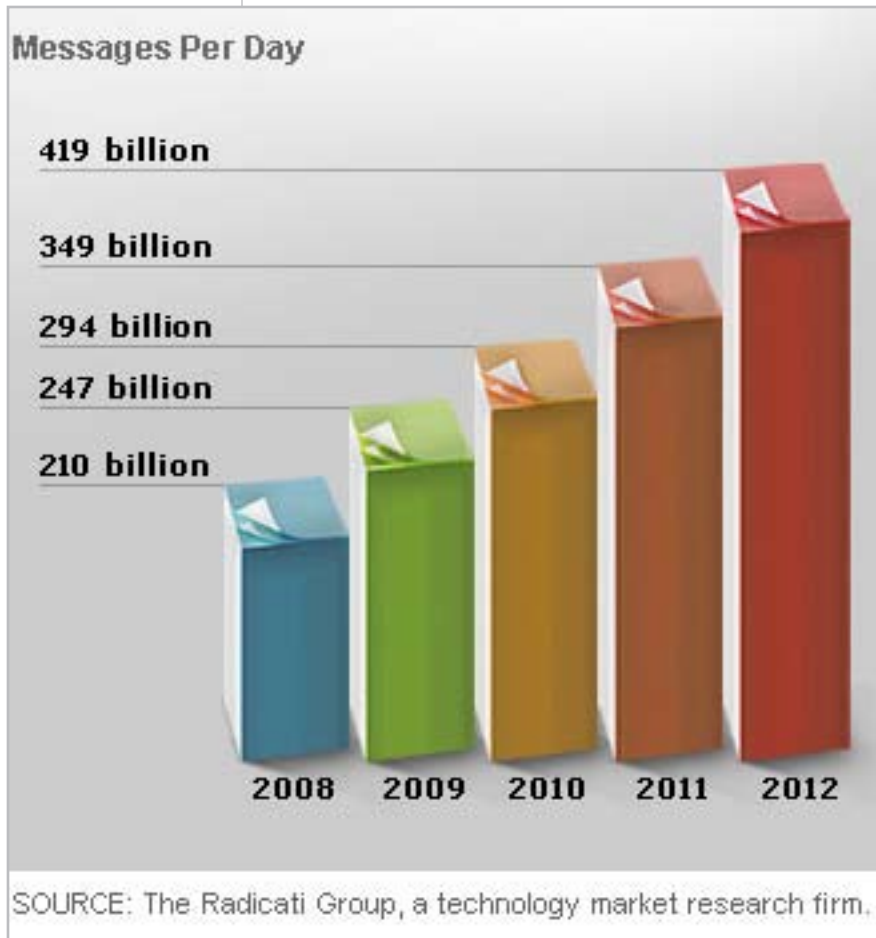
→ [Listen to the podcast: Welcome to the age of information overload \(MP3, 6:51 min, 4,71MB\)](#)

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What's being done?

Solutions vary from easy to extreme

Companies worldwide see the stress their employees are under when faced with a seemingly endless barrage of messages. Some have even complained of e-mail apnea—holding your breath while checking your inbox.



In 2008, IBM joined forces with Microsoft, Google, Intel and others to form the Information Overload Research Group (IORG), a nonprofit organization with a serious mission: reduce the volume of e-mail that is taking over inboxes to win back the productivity that is lost when workers compulsively check for new messages. The group recently held its first conference, identifying issues such as “mail jail,” e-mail etiquette, and when instant messaging is and is not appropriate.

Other enterprises employ different techniques to help workers stay on task. Pilot programs such as company-wide “quiet time” or “no e-mail Fridays” allow employees to focus, free of interruption.

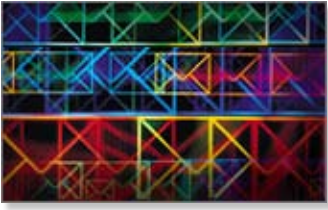
Coping strategies

Be the change you want to see

Leading Web thinker Jakob Nielsen coined the term “information pollution” and has some recommendations to help information workers wrest back their productivity from their inbox.

Personal strategies

1. Rather than checking your e-mail constantly, choose a set time to check in and see new messages.
2. Don't use “reply to all” when responding to e-mail. Send follow-up messages only to those people who will actually benefit from the reply.



3. Write informative subject lines for your e-mail messages. Be specific.
4. Create a special e-mail address for personal messages and newsletters. Only check this account once per day.
5. Be brief.
6. Avoid instant messaging unless real-time interaction will truly add value to the communication. A one-minute interruption of your colleagues will cost them ten minutes of productivity as they reestablish their mental context and get back into “flow.”

Enterprise strategies

1. Answer common customer questions on your Web site using clear and concise language. This will save your customers a lot of time and keep them from pestering you with time-consuming phone calls and e-mails.
2. User-test your intranet. Clean it up so that employees can find information faster, and make the intranet homepage their entry point for keeping up on company news and events.
3. Don't circulate internal e-mail to all employees; put the information on the intranet where people can find it when they need it.
4. Establish a company culture in which it's acceptable not to respond to e-mail immediately. This frees employees from the pressure of incessantly checking e-mail and lets them get more work done.

Reducing the volume of messages is a worthwhile goal for almost every organization. If you can achieve it, you can subsequently reduce other costs associated with managing e-mail, including server operations, personal interruption rates, message handling by recipients and even message origination. When you reduce e-mail volume, productivity does increase, and the e-mail system becomes a more effective tool for the messages it does handle.

podcast • TRANSCRIPT

[Narrator]

Here's a personal question: How many times did you check your e-mail today?

Chances are it was around 50 times—that's the average for today's knowledge worker, according to a RescueTime survey. You also checked instant messaging 77 times today. And you visited over 40 web sites.

At this rate, how did you get any actual work done?

It seems we are no longer in the information age. Welcome to the age of information overload.

IDC says e-mail volume has doubled over the past 5 years to over 40 billion person-to-person e-mails every day. And that number is expected to grow over 18 percent in each of the next five years.

As the problem has escalated, some diverse strategies have emerged. They range from the simple—like turning off your new mail alert so you're less prone to check—to a more drastic approach, such as declaring email bankruptcy, as Stanford Law Professor Lawrence Lessig did when faced with a seemingly endless inbox. And he's not alone. Many high volume e-mail users have thrown their hands up and cried "uncle," deleting their entire inbox and starting from scratch.

It's this need to ease the strain on users that inspired the creation of the Information Overload Research Group, or IORG.

[John Tang]

The information overload research group is a new kind of research consortium funded by a few different member companies. IBM is a member, Google, Microsoft and Intel have all joined, and we're adding more people.

[Narrator]

That's John Tang, from IBM Research. He's a member of the IORG and says the organization's goal is to research and publicize the problem of information overload, which costs U.S. businesses an estimated \$650 billion dollars a year.

[John Tang]

We're looking forward to hosting our conference in 2009, which draws together research on information overload so that we can share as a community what we've been learning from each other to help draw attention to and raise awareness of and make progress in making tools to improve the information overload problem among users.

[Narrator]

And users aren't the only ones constrained by too much e-mail. The companies they work for—both large and small--have to enforce limits on e-mail usage to conserve server space, often locking users out if their account exceeds its allotted size. The non-technical term for this is "mail jail," and it's what brought John Klesh, from IBM Systems and Technology Group, to the IORG. He attended their very first meeting in New York this past summer, where presenters from the corporate and academic world offered ideas on how to deal with information overload.

[John Klesh]

Some of the presentations had to do with software solutions for dealing with e mail, but I thought the ones that really hit the mark were the ones that talked about the need for people to change how they use e mail in the first place.

[Narrator]

In fact, as John points out, you may already have the tools you need to better control your inbox. IBM Lotus Notes, the application that John uses, has features such as Archiving, which frees up space by storing emails in another database when they are out of date or not in use, and the "My Attachments" tool, which allows users to automatically move large files off the server to a separate folder.

[John Klesh]

I used to be in e mail jail probably about once a month, because I'd let the size of my mail...my mail folder creep up. My excuse for that was that I didn't have time to clean it up.

Well, what I finally realized was that by not keeping on top of my e-mail, it was actually costing me more time in lost productivity. So I got in the habit of regularly using some of the tools that are built into Notes to manage the size of my mail folder. I started using archiving and my attachments regularly and really have found that I haven't been in mail jail since.

[Narrator]

Of course, e-mail isn't the lone culprit for stealing your attention. There's also instant messaging. But on this, viewpoints are conflicted. Researchers at Ohio State University and University of California, Irvine recently found that workers who used instant messaging while on the job reported fewer interruptions than colleagues who did not. On the other hand, it can take up to ten minutes to refocus on the task at hand for every one minute you spend instant messaging.

But while instant messaging can take the onus off e-mail, there is still the question of what do with all the information loitering in your inbox.

According to the LexisNexis 2008 Workplace Productivity Survey, 68% of professionals wished they could spend less time organizing information and more time using it. They say that not being able to lay their hands on the right information at the right time impedes their ability to work efficiently, and 85% of respondents said not finding the right information at the right time was a significant time waster. Meanwhile, 62% said they spent too much time sifting through useless information.

John Tang says that's where technology research needs to step up.

[John Tang]

Well, first of all, I think we need to understand the problem. What are the problems that people are experiencing, what are the problems that end users are experiencing? What tools are they trying to use to cope with the problem? And I think that's the starting point to understand or abstract

design implications for our own tools. I also think IBM Research is doing a good job of trying a number of Research prototypes to help users find information, track their e mail, manage their e mail better.

[Narrator]

Those research projects include the IBM Experience Organizer, which takes its inspiration from a magical item in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series called the Pensieve. Developed by IBM's Haifa Research Lab in Israel, this software pairs advanced mobile technologies with memory cues to develop a system that can analyze acquired data, create hooks to related experiences, and use them to populate a person's information management applications.

Say you meet a person at a conference. You use your mobile phone to take a picture of him. Then you take a picture of his business card. The Experience Organizer associates the two pieces of data because they were taken at the same time and location. It then creates a virtual briefcase of data that includes the person's image, the name of the conference where you met, the date and time, and any other relevant data.

Dr. Yaakov Navon, the lead researcher on the project, calls it a personal assistant for your memory.

IBM is also beta-testing a new type of instant messaging known as "IMSavvy," which brings some artificial intuitiveness to communications. The program acts like a doorman, sensing when you are away or busy by your typing and mouse patterns, and protecting your workflow by telling would-be interrupters you are and aren't available.

Until these and other technology tools hit the mainstream, you'll still need to juggle your e-mail, text messages, instant messages, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr and FriendFeed accounts.

And maybe—just maybe—then you can get back to work.

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