

# 7 Reasons to NOT use E-mail for Urgent Messages

by Steuart Snooks, CEO, Solutions for Success

## E-mail should never be urgent . . . really!

Do you often feel you have to check e-mail on an almost constant basis, just in case something is urgent?

One thing that many people fail to recognise these days is that e-mail was never designed for 'real time', 'live' or urgent communication. E-mail was designed as an 'asynchronous' mode of conversation, with the delay between sending and receiving the message ranging from just a few minutes to many hours, or even days.

So while e-mail arrives nearly instantaneously most of the time these days, the reality is that you can't truly rely on this for urgent messages. Understanding this can be very, very liberating for you, both as a sender and as a receiver.

This series of blog posts will outline the following 7 reasons to NOT use e-mail for urgent messages;

1. Lack of background detail, richness and context
2. E-mail can be easily misunderstood
3. It can actually take LONGER to **fully** communicate your message
4. The synchronicity of e-mail as a sender
5. The synchronicity of e-mail as a receiver
6. It's the wrong 'mode' for urgent communication
7. Limits your control of e-mail

Once you are liberated from the 'tyranny of urgency' that so often surrounds e-mail, you will discover and enjoy many other productivity and effectiveness benefits.

## Reason #1: Lack of background detail, richness and context

E-mail is just one of many modes of communication that are available to us these days. For some messages, it's the best mode to use; for others, it's not. And urgent messages are one type of message that is NOT suited to e-mail. Let me explain . . .

The diagram below is a media richness framework originally developed by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel. This framework can be used to rank or evaluate the 'richness' of various communication modes, by their ability to accurately convey the information sent via that mode.

In the framework below, you can see a range of communication modes, from text/instant/facebook or twitter messages, to e-mail to voicemail to phone (mobile/landline), to video conference to meetings. As you move along this scale, the degree of detail, context and background information in the message tends to be greater - they increase in 'media richness'.

With instant messages, you tend to use as few words as possible. E-mail permits you to add more detail and include coloured text, documents and photos, adding 'richness' to the communication. Voicemail allows you to use your distinctly personal and recognisable voice; you can vary speed, tone and volume of speech and add emotion, making this mode even richer and more impactful than e-mail.

Phone communication allows greater richness again, as issues can be discussed back n' forth, ensuring greater clarity and understanding. With video-conferencing, a visual dimension is added, thus allowing eye contact and facial responses to add further richness. Finally, in a meeting you also have body language and physical gestures, for the richest of communication modes.

However, these days we tend to gravitate towards e-mail for the majority of our communications - because it's easy, quick, convenient, cheap, gives us a record of the conversation and so on.

However, with e-mail, we are working with only the written word (no auditory or visual components), so it can be difficult to achieve great richness or detail in our message, especially if the e-mail is urgent! In fact, by the time we achieve the richness needed to provide clarity to the e-mail message, we've probably compromised its urgency - it would have been better to use a different communication mode for that urgent message!

## Reason #2: E-mail can be easily misunderstood

As discussed in the last blog post, we tend to gravitate towards e-mail for the majority of our communications because it's easy, quick, convenient, cheap, and gives us a record of the conversation and so on.

However, sending a message is only one part of the communication we're trying to achieve. Ensuring that our recipient(s) has, firstly, received and secondly, understood the message, in the same way as we sent it, is the other part of communicating *effectively*.

So while e-mail can seem to be a quick way of communicating, it often lacks the richness needed to ensure clarity. As you can see in the diagram below, when the speed of communication increases, the degree of context, background detail and media richness decreases and the potential for being misunderstood increases.

For example, using a richer mode of communication such as a meeting, allows any misunderstandings or misinterpretations to be quickly identified and corrected. But if that same message is sent via e-mail it can take quite some time before the misunderstanding is detected and then longer again before it is corrected.

So, when using e-mail, it is useful to ask yourself the following questions;

- How likely is this message to be misunderstood?
- What are the implications if it is misunderstood?
- How much time and effort would be needed to correct things if it is misunderstood?

This is even more important when sending urgent messages. If it takes more time to establish and ensure an accurate communication, the urgency of the message is compromised, so it would have better to use a more suitable mode for communicating it in the first place.

### **Reason #3: It can actually take LONGER to *fully* communicate your message**

As discussed in the last blog post, sending a message is only one part of the communication we're trying to achieve. Ensuring that our recipient(s) have firstly received and secondly understood the message, in the same way as we sent it, is the other part of communicating effectively.

As we can see on the diagram below, the quicker the mode of communication used, the less 'richness' it has and the greater the potential for misunderstanding.

Of course, there are times when e-mail will be quicker than using the phone. If you wanted input from a half a dozen colleagues on an idea or proposal, a quick e-mail might take only 10 minutes in total (5 mins to send and 5 mins to scan their responses). The same communication by phone could easily take 35 mins or more (5 mins speaking to each colleague plus another 5 mins to consolidate and digest their feedback).

So if speediness of sending the message is the sole measure of effectiveness, then e-mail is obviously the winner. But only if the message is clearly understood the first time it is read! How many times do you send a single e-mail that becomes 3 or 4 or 5 e-mails back and forth (over a number of days) as you try to establish clarity and understanding of the original message?

So, while e-mail can be quick to send at your end, it may often actually take LONGER to complete the communication loop by the time clear understanding has been established; it would have been better to use a different mode of communication in the first place!

With the pace and pressure of modern business, we are often in a rush and try to deal with things quickly at the 'front end', but then often pay a bigger time penalty at the 'back end' of the process, as we follow up, chase up and clean up communications that didn't have the appropriate level of 'richness' when they were first sent.

## Reason #4: The synchronicity of e-mail as a sender

Another aspect of the media richness framework discussed in this series of blog posts is the synchronicity of e-mail.

As you can see in the diagram below, when using instant messages, e-mail and voicemail, we are using an **asynchronous** mode of communication. That means we can communicate with others without both of us having to be available 'at the same time'.

You see, when you send an e-mail, it's received by a mail server at your end, stored for a period of time and then forwarded along the internet to your recipient. It arrives at the recipient's mail server (usually amazing quickly, but not always!), where it's stored until the recipient receives it in their in-box (most e-mail goes immediately from server to mailbox but not always – some may have a delayed send/receive interval or may only allow e-mail to download from the server when they manually click 'send/receive').

The periods of time that various servers retain your message before forwarding it along are usually very brief, but there's not really any guarantee that they will be. There could easily be any of a number of various and legitimate mail server delays along the path your e-mail will take to get to your recipient. That doesn't mean the system is broken, that's just how the system works. And of course, on top of that, your recipient could simply be away from their in-box, or choosing to check e-mail less frequently than it might happen to suit you.

Instead, we need to realise that if something is truly urgent, then we would do better to choose a more appropriate tool to communicate our message. This could be a phone call, or walking around to see someone face-to-face. These are 'real time', 'live' or 'synchronous' modes of communication, better suited to urgent messages.

The reality is, that if you really need someone to get your message almost immediately, then e-mail is the wrong tool! If your message is urgent, you can't count on e-mail. Now, you can try using it that way and, most of the time, it'll be fine. But you can't count on it! You can just about guarantee, that if you're using an asynchronous mode of communication to communicate a synchronous (ie: urgent) message, at some stage it is going to be delayed and usually when you least expect it! That's called Murphy's Law!

## Reason #5: The synchronicity of e-mail as a receiver

Relying on an asynchronous mode of communication (ie: e-mail) to communicate a synchronous (ie: urgent) message, as a sender, is going to let you down at some stage. Relying on e-mail as the channel for urgent communications **as a receiver** is also problematic.

One of the huge benefits of e-mail is that it puts you, as the recipient, in control of when you choose to read and/or deal with incoming messages. Realising that e-mail should never be relied upon for 'real time' or 'urgent' communications is very, very liberating. As a recipient, you get to read new e-mail when it suits you, depending on whatever else is happening in your workday. Plus you get to choose when, how or even if you will reply to each message.

In reality, e-mail really puts both the sender and the recipient in positions of control, as long as they recognise that the cost of that control is a potential delay between sending and reading. And yet, for something we have so much control over, many people feel they are at the mercy of e-mail. They feel pressured to read and respond to their e-mail almost as soon as it arrives. But e-mail is not urgent (or it shouldn't be).

So, what if the message is actually urgent? What if there is a truly urgent situation or issue where the sender needs you, the recipient, to provide an immediate response or action? Ask yourself, what do you do when you send an urgent e-mail but get no response? Do you send another e-mail and then another? Or do you quickly realise that, in these instances, e-mail is not the right answer, regardless of how well it is written and that another method (such as the phone or face-to-face contact), would be more appropriate.

Of course, these days text messages can often be used for urgent messages as they are received on a mobile phone, rather than a computer. But that only works if the receiver has their mobile phone with them at the time!

Bottom line is that we should use a synchronous mode of communication when sending messages that require a **synchronous** or 'live' conversation. Understanding this (and getting those you're in regular contact with to also understand it) will give you great peace of mind and help you restore e-mail to its rightful position as an excellent method of asynchronous communication. You can happily ignore what used to be interruptions from e-mail and leave it till your designated times for checking it, knowing that nothing urgent should arrive via that channel. Anything urgent will, instead, reach you by a more suitable (ie: synchronous) method.

One popular way to get that understanding is to simply add a line to the signature block of every e-mail you send saying something like; *P.S. "I am not always at my desk but I do check my e-mail 3 or 4 times per day. If your matter is truly urgent, please contact me directly on my mobile number – 0413 830 772."*

You can modify this suggested sentence to suit your preference and environment. This helps to educate people about how you handle e-mail, trains them in what to expect when communicating with you and manages their expectations about how promptly (or not) who will respond to their messages.

## Reason #6: It's the wrong 'mode' for urgent communication

As we saw in last week's blog, urgent e-mails can't be relied on by senders and puts a real (and unnecessary) strain on receivers. The reality is that if you really need someone to get your message almost immediately, then e-mail is the wrong tool to use.

Consider the diagram below and how the range of communication modes available to us can be divided into 3 basic categories;

- written or digital – text/instant messages, facebook, tweets, e-mail
- auditory – voicemail and phone
- visual – video-conference, face-to-face meetings

E-mail is a written, digital form of communication. Urgent messages, by their very nature, are not best suited to this method – they are best communicated using a synchronous mode that involves 'live' conversation by phone or face-to-face contact.

If your message is urgent, you can't count on e-mail. You can try using it that way and, most of the time, it will work for you. But you can't fully rely on it! You can just about guarantee that, at some stage, an urgent message will not get through or it will be delayed, and often when you least expect it (Murphy's Law at work).

Why choose to treat e-mail as if it were a real-time communication tool, when by its very nature, it cannot be?

## Reason #7: Limits your control of e-mail

As we saw in last week's blog, e-mail is the wrong tool to use for urgent messages. Allowing e-mail to be used in this way limits the amount of control you have when handling e-mail.

As a sender, you can't really rely on e-mail for an urgent message. You can try using it that way and, most of the time, it'll be fine. But you can't count on it! As a result, you lose control of the communication process.

But if you don't rely on e-mail for urgent messages, you *can* be in control of *when* you send e-mail. You get to write it when you feel like writing it. And your recipient gets to read it when they feel like reading it. You're not interrupting or distracting them from other tasks and activities they may be doing (ones that are probably a higher priority than your e-mail).

As recipient, relying on e-mail for urgent communication makes you a slave to the inbox and to the need to check every new e-mail, almost as it arrives, to determine whether it's urgent or not. Again, it limits your control - you are at the mercy of whoever is sending you e-mail (urgent or not). It also limits your choices on what you will do with any given period of time, time that can so easily be interrupted (and stolen) when you're worried that a new e-mail might be urgent.

When used as it should be, e-mail really puts both sender and recipient in positions of control. When it is used for urgent messages, both lose control of their e-mail.

So that's the last in this series of the **7 Reasons to NOT use E-mail for Urgent Messages**. Hope you gained some new insights and a determination to get control of e-mail, restoring it to its rightful position as an excellent method of asynchronous communication.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stewart". The script is cursive and fluid.

Stewart Snooks