

An Industrial-Age Solution to Email Overload

A century ago, the Pullman Company came up with an ingenious solution to help brass workers do their jobs without distraction.

By Cal Newport

In the early 20th century, the Pullman Company, manufacturer of the eponymous sleeper train cars, was in trouble. As its president, John Runnells, described it in a business magazine of the era, "During [our] long years of growth wasteful ways had been fostered, losses, inaccuracies, and confusing unrelated systems had been spontaneously developed." Runnells noted that other small manufacturers around the U.S. shared Pullman's predicament, and many were also beginning to recognize that their "conditions were bad and methods slipshod."

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At a century's distance, the Pullman Company seems to be the quaint opposite of the tech giants that dominate the modern economy, but its problems mirror some of the issues knowledge workers grapple with today—top among them the deluge of communication that threatens to drown many of us at work.

DISORDER IN THE BRASS DEPARTMENT

"In former days, approximately seven men [managed] the brass department and its 350 workmen," Runnells explains. "In many places throughout the plant, [however,] one man or another was devoting a part of his time to assist the active seven. All the planning was being done somewhere. And every man contributing by that much demoralized his own particular work by the interruption."

In other words, the small number of managers created a situation where *all* workers had to get involved, one way or the other, in managing the logistics needed to keep the plant running. According to Runnells, it was common for workers from other parts of the factory to show up at the brass department and wait around most of the day, bothering other employees, until getting the part they needed.

This is what Runnells meant by "slipshod": work procedures were informal, if you needed something, you had to figure out how to get it, and if someone needed something from *you*, they'd bug you until they got it. The constant interruptions made it hard to keep track of details, and all that divided attention reduced productivity.

"SLIPSHOD METHODS" IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Sound familiar? Plenty of modern organizations suffer similar problems. In a workplace where everyone's instantly accessible, whether by messaging apps like Slack or through a fixed email address feeding into a single inbox, it's easy to embrace informal work habits: If you need something from someone, just shoot them an email, and they'll do the same if they need you. There's no need to think through projects in advance—just start an email thread and figure it out on the fly.

The flipside, of course, is that everyone must now be constantly checking, reading, and responding to messages, lest all these ad hoc processes grind to a halt. Once again, interruptions are constant and attention is divided, with serious costs to productivity.

If the story ended here, we could file it away as a slice of business trivia confirming that some workplace issues are timeless. But it *doesn't* end here. John Runnells actually solved this problem at the Pullman Company, and his solution may hold some lessons for his latter-day, digital descendants.

THE PULLMAN SOLUTION

Runnells's first step was probably the last thing you'd expect at a company whose profits were dwindling: He oversaw "a vast increase in overhead." In the brass department alone, Runnells expanded the number of managers from seven to 47.

This was a hugely expensive move; these managers were skilled and each cost up to \$1,000 a year in salary. Next, in a shift that might puzzle open-office and constant-connectivity advocates, he made it *harder* for people to communicate, going so far as to actually lock the doors and screen the windows of the brass department, forcing outsiders to instead submit requests through official "channels" that were to be monitored and optimized by the new manager corps.

"Does it pay?" Runnells asks rhetorically about his changes. "It has certainly done so!" Workers were now freed from the implicit management decisions and administrative scheming that were constantly sapping their attention. "Now all [logistical work and planning] is done in one place by men who do nothing else—and no one else can be distracted by the problems of the brass department or disturb its operation by unrequired interference," Runnells wrote. As a result, "workmen concentrated and the product showed the results."

In the end, the new workflow at the Pullman Company generated a savings of about \$100 per train car, more than compensating for the increased cost of the overhead and generating what Runnells affirmed was a "substantial profit."

In turning around the Pullman Company, John Runnells intuited a simple but powerful idea (whose modern implications I explore in my new book, *Deep Work*): Work processes fail when they divide workers' attention and lead to mediocre results. But to this day, the solution is still difficult for many companies to accept—that spending more money on managers and encouraging burdensome communication policies are justified if it gives skilled workers their attention back, letting them actually apply those skills more productively.

MODERN-DAY LESSONS

Runnells would argue that to reclaim the attention of skilled knowledge workers, our current email-overloaded work habits need to go. And getting a real handle on them takes structure, not just a bunch of hacks. That might mean spending more money and making certain processes *more* burdensome.

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I'd wager, for instance, that if Runnells were running a software company in 2016, he'd deactivate his programmers' email accounts and hire more managers to serve as buffers between the developer teams and everybody else. Instead of checking emails all the time, developers might have a single daily status meeting with their team manager, then spend the rest of their time actually writing good code.

To be sure, that would reduce some of the company's day-to-day agility. Teams would communicate informally less often, and the HR department and middle managers might fume at the extra effort it takes to get the more administrative things done. But I'd also wager that a programmer whose undivided attention is staunchly defended can deliver much higher quality code, and more of it—repaying the costs and irritations of those defensive measures.

These types of changes are probably too radical for most businesses to consider, and it's understandable why companies wouldn't want to slow down communication or make life less convenient for some workers. But that perception may shift as we come to we realize that all that convenience has a cost.

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