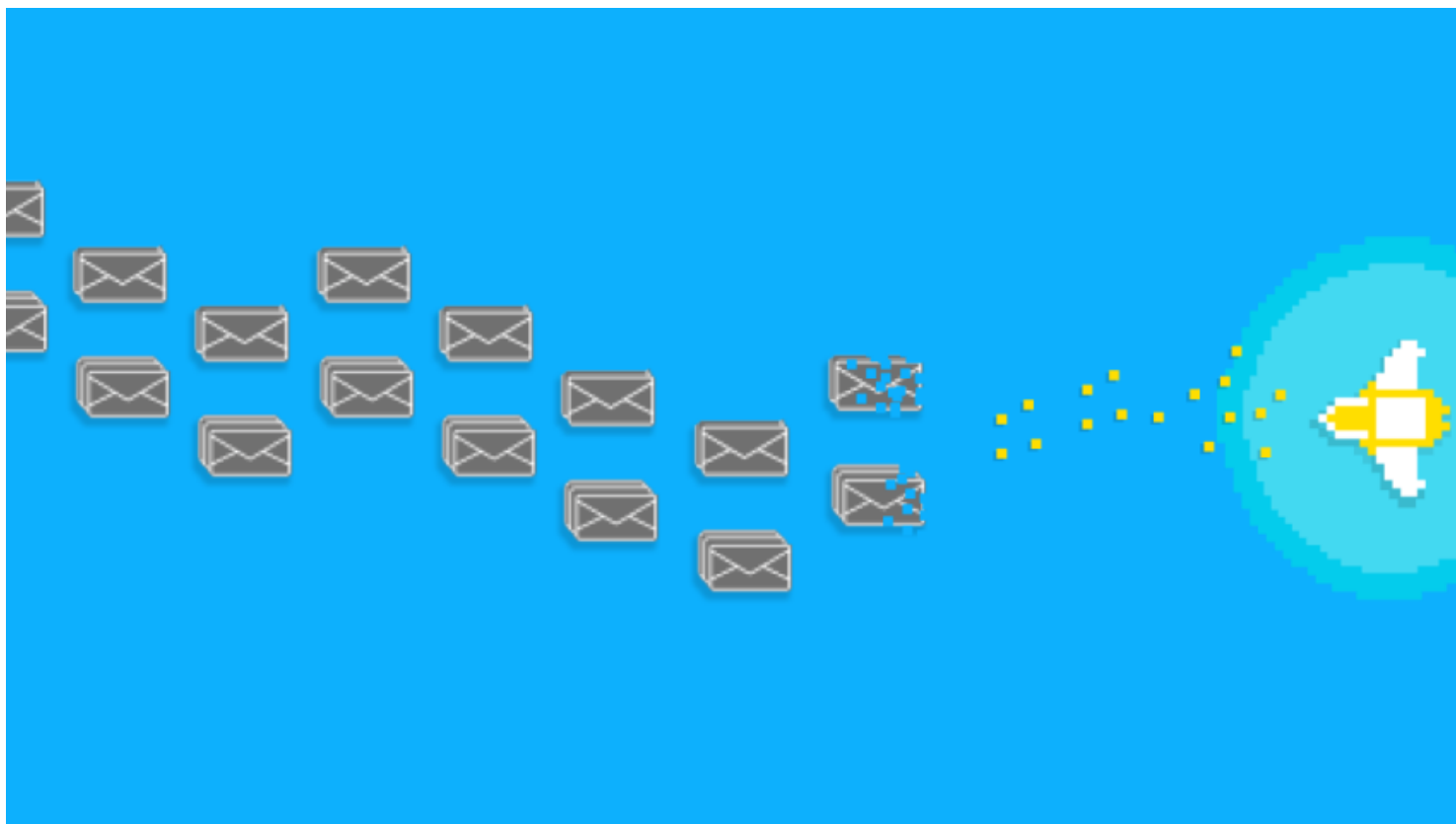


A Modest Proposal: Eliminate Email

by Cal Newport

FEBRUARY 18, 2016



HBR STAFF

In the early 1980s, IBM decided to deploy an internal email system. In typical careful IBM fashion, they began by measuring employee communication, so they could estimate how many messages would be sent on the new system. Based on this research, IBM provisioned a \$10 million mainframe to run their email server – an amount of processing power that should have easily handled the typical volume of intra-office interaction.

Within a week, the machine was overwhelmed.

As an engineer who worked on this project recently recalled, the email team had gravely underestimated the load. Instead of employees simply transferring their normal offline communication to the more convenient online system, they began to communicate *vastly more* than they ever had before. “Thus – in a mere week or so – was gained and blown the potential productivity gain of email,” he lamented.

This story highlights a common misunderstanding about our current tempestuous relationship with email. Most knowledge workers believe that email is a passive tool they choose to use to make their *real work* easier. But as the Big Blue engineers discovered three decades ago, this technology is not passive; it instead actively changes what we mean by “real work.”

Accompanying the rise of this technology was a new, unstructured workflow in which all tasks – be it a small request from HR or collaboration on a key strategy – are now handled in the same manner: you dive in and start sending quick messages which arrive in a single undifferentiated inbox at their recipients. These tasks unfold in an ad hoc manner with informal messages sent back and forth on demand as needed to push things forward.

This unstructured workflow arose from the core properties of email technology – namely, the standard practice of associating addresses with individuals (and not, say, teams, or request type, or project), and the low marginal cost of sending a message. It spread for the simple reason that it’s easier in the moment. It takes significantly less effort to shoot off quick messages, for example, than it is to more carefully plan your work day, figuring out in advance what you need, from whom, and by when.

But just because this unstructured approach is standard and easy doesn’t mean it’s smart. It’s important to remember that no blue ribbon committee or brilliant executive ever sat down and decided that this workflow would make businesses more productive or employees more satisfied. It instead just emerged as an instinctual reaction to a disruptive new technology. Like the employees at 1980s IBM, one day we looked up and noticed that what we meant by “real work” had shifted radically under our feet.

The high cost of cheap messages

Given that no one planned the rise of the unstructured approach, it shouldn't offend anyone when I claim that it's been a *disastrous* development for the knowledge work sector. A consequence of this workflow is that an organization's tasks become entangled in a complicated network of dependencies with inbox-enslaved individuals sited at each node. The only way to keep productive energy flowing through this network is for everyone to continually check, send, and reply to the multitude of messages flowing past—all in an attempt to drive tasks, in an ad hoc manner, toward completion. If you step away from your human network router duties, the whole apparatus can grind into deadlock. This reality forces modern knowledge workers to constantly check their inbox and feel great guilt or unease about the possibility of unanswered communication awaiting attention. This compulsion is not irrational, as these unrelenting messages are not supplemental to real work — they're instead at the core of what we now mean by this term.

The negative impacts of this lifestyle are so widely felt that they hardly need elaboration. But for the sake of this argument, I'll briefly note what I believe to be the two biggest harms.

First, this incessant communication fragments attention, leaving only small stretches left in which to attempt to think deeply, apply your skills at a high level, or otherwise perform well the core activity of knowledge work: extracting value from information. To make matters worse, cognitive performance during these stretches is further reduced by the “attention residue” left from the frequent context switching required to “just check” if something important arrived.

These behaviors are not just annoying; they have a substantial impact on productivity. I recently wrote a book called *Deep Work*, which details the immense professional benefits experienced when you allow people to spend long periods, without distraction, focused on cognitively demanding tasks. To eliminate the ability for knowledge workers to perform deep work is like putting assembly line workers in thick gloves that hamper their ability to manipulate their tools — it's an absurd self-imposed handicap.

The second harm is more personal. As more knowledge workers now acknowledge, the inbox-bound lifestyle created by an unstructured workflow is exhausting and anxiety-provoking. Humans are not wired to exist in a constant state of divided attention, and we need the ability to gain distance from work to reflect and recharge. Put simply, this workflow, which can transform even the highest skilled knowledge workers into message-passing automatons, is making an entire sector of our economy miserable.

The syllogism here is inescapable, leading us to the conclusion that there's great advantage for those organizations willing to end the reign of the unstructured workflow and replace it with something designed from scratch with the specific goal of maximizing value production and employee satisfaction.

Given the tangled relationship between email and our current approach to work, however, it's also clear that this transformation is almost certainly going to require a radical first step: to eliminate email.

Tame efforts to curb the worst impacts of this technology – be it email-free Fridays or smarter inbox applications – are doomed to failure. Once you assign each employee a universally accessible address of the form name@company.com, an unstructured workflow will follow, and this workflow, by its very nature, demands the excesses that plague the knowledge economy. These problems cannot be tamed with better etiquette. The email weed, in other words, must be pulled out by the root.

Replacing the chaos of email with a structured workflow

The natural follow-up question, of course, is what qualifies as a “better” workflow. Even the most strident email opponents recognize that we need some way to coordinate and communicate with colleagues. To validate the idea that organizations *can* thrive without this tool, let me offer a concrete alternative inspired by my own experience in academia: office hours.

The concept is simple. Employees no longer have personalized email addresses. Instead, each individual posts a schedule of two or three stretches of time during the day when he or she will be available for communication. During these *office hours*, the individual

guarantees to be reachable in person, by phone, and by instant messenger technologies like Slack. Outside of someone's stated office hours, however, you cannot command their attention. If you need them, you have to keep track of what you need until they're next available.

On the flipside, when you're between your own scheduled office hours, you have no inboxes to check or messages demanding response. You're left, in other words, to simply work. And of course, when you're home in the evening or on vacation, the fact that there's no inbox slowly filling up with urgent obligations allows a degree of rest and recharge that's all but lost from the lives of most knowledge workers today.

Notice that the workflow induced by an office-hours scheme replaces on-demand messaging with structured communication. People now know exactly when someone might need their attention and exactly when they can command the attention of others. This freedom from a constant background hum of interaction will increase the intensity of concentration achievable when people need to work deeply, and the efficiency with which shallower tasks can be batched together and dispatched.

This workflow also replaces asynchronous interactions with synchronous conversation. This change is crucial. Synchronous conversation is efficient and nuanced: not only does it allow you to handle in three minutes decisions that might have otherwise taken three days of attention-snagging messages, but it tends to also produce more thoughtful conclusions. Imagine, for example, that Alice and Bob need to work together to write a report. If they use email, the process would likely unfold in an inefficient manner, as both Alice and Bob, under the Sisyphean pressure of an ever-filling inbox, keep dashing off quick responses to each other so as to temporarily clear the issue out of their psychic space. In the office-hours scenario, however, Alice and Bob would be forced to talk in real time about the report project. This interaction, though taking more time than sending a quick message at first, is more likely to lead to a complete and coherent plan for how the work should best unfold in the days that follow.

Answers to common objections

There are, of course, issues with replacing email with office hours. Consider, for example, client communication. I accept that this is an area that an organization might need to leave untouched. It's perfectly reasonable, in other words, to keep this office-hours strategy confined to internal communication, allowing your interactions with clients to still meet their expectation for your availability. (Though it should be noted that when it comes to external communication, many issues related to the unstructured workflow are *already* solved: there exist many popular client management systems that provide significant structure to such interactions.)

Another issue is team communication. An advantage of email is that it allows you to communicate with multiple people at once. It would be a burden to have to attend multiple office hours to spread the same message to all members of a team. A solution to this issue is to synchronize office hour slots within teams—creating periods every day where you know you can talk to a whole team at once, using a Slack chatroom or conference call.

There's also the issue of transferring files, which many now accomplish using email messages. Fortunately, there are no shortage of shared-folder technologies, such as Dropbox or Google Drive, that make it simple to pass files between different users.

Perhaps the biggest concern generated by this proposal is the fear that there are some situations that really do seem to require the asynchrony provided by email. I want to emphasize, however, that office hours do not eliminate asynchrony – they just shift the responsibility such interactions generate. In an email-driven organization, for example, if I have some feedback to give you on a report draft, I would simply send you these notes when I was done compiling them. This action places the responsibility for keeping track of the information falls to the receiver. In an office-hours organization, by contrast, I would instead hold onto these comments until your next convenient office hours, at which point I could bring them to your attention in real time. The responsibility for keeping track of this information now falls to the sender – but the asynchronous nature of the interaction remains.

There will, of course, be some circumstances where the urgency of an issue dictates that you cannot wait until office hours to interact with someone. In such cases, however, the best solution is an old one: call. In other words, I would suspect that an organization using this strategy would have a policy that you can and should call someone's office or cell phone if there's a truly urgent matter. I would conjecture that such emergencies would be much rarer than most might predict.

More generally speaking, when I've floated this idea in business circles, many of the complaints that are presented as *reasons why this will not work for me* turn out to be *reasons why this would make certain situations harder for me*. There's a key difference here. The goal for most organizations is not to make work as easy as possible; it is, instead, to organize work in a way that allows it to be effective, productive, and satisfying. The unstructured workflow that currently dominates satisfies the former, while solutions such as office hours satisfy the latter.

Office hours might not work for *every* organization – although, as I've argued, they would probably apply in more settings than you might at first assume. The broader goal for this discussion is to illuminate the true depth of the problems generated by email, and to underscore the feasibility of radical solutions.

Email, as a technology, is not intrinsically bad. But the unstructured workflow it engenders is disastrous. We need to fix it—and I'm doubtful this can be accomplished while email still plays a core role in our business culture. It's this reality that brings me back to the modest proposal that titles this essay, which, if workplace trends continue as they are, might one day soon seem less like an interesting thought experiment and more like a necessary call to action.

Cal Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown University where he studies the mathematics of digital networks. He also writes books about the impact of these technologies. His latest book, *Deep Work*, argues that the ability to focus without distraction is becoming one of the most valuable and rare skills in our economy.

This article is about PRODUCTIVITY

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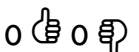
15 COMMENTS

Ranjit Notani 8 days ago

While the idea of 'office hours' is good and should be embraced, there are many reasons why an asynchronous communication approach is still needed. It is just that email does such a poor job of it. I think the best approach is to combine a synchronous communication approach with a purpose-built system designed for asynchronous communication. This article touches on how this might be accomplished.

<https://tmail21.com/blog/the-biggest-pitfall-of-slack-and-how-to-overcome-it/>

REPLY



Chandra Nukala 12 days ago

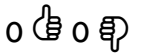
I am surprised by the proposal. I feel that one is trading emails with meetings and no offense - I prefer emails over endless meetings :-)

I have worked at various companies that use many tools - IM, WhatsApp, iMessage, Yammer and even Slack. Now I get tasks on all these platforms rather than one platform (I have to monitor all these channels). "Email or not" tasks get inserted in queues.

I find email very useful when communicating with remote teams (Especially overseas teams. I cannot imagine setting up office time for every email/task and especially in all the different time zones). The real problem is not the tool but the use of the tool - setting expectations and consistent rules regarding the use of these tools makes it easy for the communication flow.

It is very important to realize that communication is the lifeblood of an organization. The tools used for the communication are based on the individuals and driven by leaders (and their expectations) in the organizations. Slack or IM are not removing the need to communicate - they just are putting it in a different queue (it is just not called inbox).

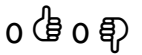
REPLY



Mike Raia 13 days ago

I agree with the spirit of this article if not the ultimate solution. I think we need email (or a version of it anyway) in some form for all the reasons people mention in the comments. What I really think we need is a prescription for how to use all the communication channels at our disposal. When should you send an email instead of an instant message, a post to a group collaboration tool, a phone call, a walk over to someone's office, etc.? Would it be possible to define rules of engagement when it comes to organizational communication?

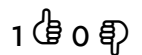
REPLY



Doug Collins 16 days ago

Would be interesting to map what the author identifies as "structured workflows" to the critical value streams the organization supports in order to realize its charter. In this context, the availability of an employee would be treated the same as the availability of any other corporate asset (e.g., a stamping machine or drill press).

REPLY



NORMAN KEANE 16 days ago

I spent a lot of time 'time managing' my email responses. I tend not to reply immediately, but would allocate blocks to time to certain key areas of responsibility and would respond to emails in their appropriate block of time.

One idea I have is that all work should be as per GTD in 'projects'. If someone needs you to work on something, they have to invite you onto their project. Communication would be limited to those on the project. When the project is completed, email on that specific topic would cease. This would bring more focus to email communication and would start to address all of the cc's and bcc's that cause havoc.

REPLY

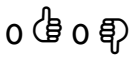


Theresa George 17 days ago

Overall, I hate email. I like most of the ideas here. I do see one problem--in the type of work I do (web production), email can also serve as record-keeping. It's important to me that I have a record of what I told you I was going to do and by when. I can keep track of that separately, but for certain types of

conversation/ recaps etc, it's important that we have a record of where we left off/ what the expectations were.

REPLY



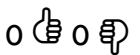
Sam Ky 17 days ago

If I may offer a modest proposal of my own, rather than mere *speculation* that email engenders "unstructured workflow" that is a "disastrous development" such that "we need to fix it", wouldn't the article be improved if it provided bona-fide empirical evidence that email *actually* reduces overall productivity?

If anything, the question of whether email truly does help/hurt productivity is highly amenable to a controlled field experiment. Have a certain number of business units (teams, individual offices, etc.) be provided with email and a comparable set of business units that lack email and then compare the subsequent productivity of the two groups. Given that there are still some (generally blue-collar) firms that are still implementing corporate email for the first time, one might conduct a field experiment through a staggered system rollout where only certain teams are randomly selected to be initially provided with email whereas other teams are provided email at a later date, and then compare the difference in productivity of those two groups. Alternatively, perhaps one could investigate periods where an organization was spontaneously denied email - perhaps via an unpredicted server outage - to see whether those organizations actually became more productive during those times when they lacked email relative to the times when they had access.

Otherwise, frankly, we have no real empirical evidence to support this article - something that I would argue that HBR readers should demand from its authors. (It is unfortunate that HBR continues to publish articles that lack evidence).

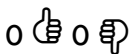
REPLY



Selma BM 17 days ago

A very interesting and current topic which personally affects me! I feel like I spend most days answering to emails, failing to produce any work. I also like the idea of deep work. Open spaces as trendy as they are, brought a new reality, which is being constantly interrupted.

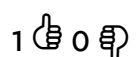
REPLY



David Lanchart 18 days ago

Thierry Breton banned email when he was CEO of Atos, they had to create a platform called Zero email to collaborate.



REPLY



Wedgekin Black 19 days ago

I'm a big user of alternative online communication systems, like direct, private messages, many-to-many group conversations, and enterprise social networks (Yammer, Slack, Skype IM). I work to reduce the email I send and the email I have to deal with. However, there is definitely room and need for asynchronous communication. We are not all online / available at the same time, and thoughts and directives can be sent without requiring the other people involved to be present at the same time (synchronous communication). So this 'office hours' idea seems incredibly limiting, and suitable for very specific situations. I'm not always available, and I'm happy to catch up on DMs, texts, private messages, group conversations, and email, later on.



REPLY

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CJ McClanahan 19 days ago

I love this concept. Professionals drown in unnecessary communication because the quick back and forth feeds their addiction to interruptions. Instead of this radical of an approach, what if we simply put a time limit on our email every day - say 1 hour. So, everyone would have to be extremely disciplined with how much they used the tool each day?



REPLY

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Sabbir Hussain 19 days ago

I felt sorry for a fellow colleague who received more than 150 mail that day as he is a member of an email group of the unit and the Email group receives a copy every time. He only had 12-15 useful mails that day. And it happens everyday for him! What a waste of productive time..

REPLY

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Juan Rencoret 19 days ago

Eighteen years ago I had an ISP. As a service to our customers (we provide service to business only) we measure the increased inefficiency of a person because the mere fact of having access to the Internet. We made a direct measurement in the workplace, at the time the result was - 16%.

One source of inefficiency was that people do not move from the job place to procrastinate.



Another was mail inefficiency. We found that unlike the physical mail, where one address the entire issue in each communication, in email people break down the message. Every recipient is willing to comment on the coincidences or disagreements in parts of the document instead of the whole issue and its context.

Finally, more than often happens that, after multiple emails we obtain an inconsistent final document. The rate of email interchange at that time was, 15 to 17 emails against 3 to 4 regular mails, 5 to 6 times, to complete a final document.

Email is an excellent tool, but an important number of users work with it inefficiently. It is hard to rule to improve their use; there is a people culture of always be waiting for a message. Maybe, to setup email improvement objectives, as an internal company strategy, can be a way to improve its applicability.

No email, as suggested in the article, can be counterproductive because it touches such cultural issue.



REPLY

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Peter Shak 20 days ago

Congratulations! This is the first article that passed spelling and grammar check!



REPLY

1  2 

joe w 20 days ago

Flip side to the argument -- are meetings and live conversations necessarily more productive? I've been in a lot of organizations that have tried to have meeting free periods, or limit who is in meetings, because of the drag on productivity. There have been many people in my career that I've know I cannot talk to without the conversation requiring an hour or more. Email becomes a way to communicate more efficiently. If all I really need is to communicate a budget update, or discuss a change in a spreadsheet, email is awesome. You could argue that email is responsible for changing what we perceive as the speed of business for the worse. That where we used to take time to debate and explore issues we now feel we need to resolve everything in real time, and that is a great topic for discussion. But, overall I have seen email boost productivity. Instead, I place emphasis on email rules, such as don't reply all indiscriminately, make sure that you clearly address whether an action is expected and by whom, and stop using email when it becomes clear that a conversation is needed.

REPLY

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