

To Reduce E-mail, Start at the Top

by Chris Brown, Andrew Killick, and Karen Renaud

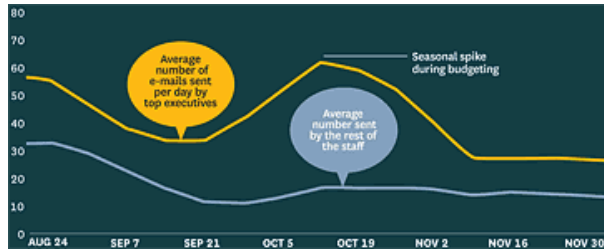
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The main reason our e-mail in-boxes consume so much of our time is that we have little control over how many messages we receive. But we *can* control how many messages we send. That seemingly obvious insight sparked a significant reduction in one company's e-mail traffic: After the executives reduced their output, other workers followed suit.

When the seven-person top European management team at the London-based company International Power wanted to increase the firm's efficiency, an analysis suggested that a glut of e-mail might be part of the problem. The executives initially believed that the high volume was due entirely to others' actions and were astonished to learn that they themselves were sending 56 messages a day, on average.

Instead of deploying e-mail management tools to cope with the overflow, the company took a page from lean manufacturing. It decided to treat communication as if it were an industrial process, targeting efficiency killers such as overproduction and defects (confusing, unnecessary, or ineffective messages, which often simply breed other messages). Acting on the hypothesis that a reduction in executive outflow would prompt a reduction in employee outflow, it aimed to cut the number of e-mails sent by the top team members by 20% within four months.

When executives at a London-based firm reduced the e-mail they sent, subordinates followed suit.



Despite a few misgivings (some felt the intervention intruded on their personal style), the executives underwent training to reduce their e-mail output by taking more-deliberate actions: not forwarding messages unless strictly necessary, limiting messages' recipients, and choosing the form of communication that would most efficiently accomplish the task at hand. In a phone call, for example, vocal tone provides real-time

feedback on whether a message is being understood—something that's missing in the low-bandwidth e-mail channel. Facial expressions and body language make in-person meetings an even richer method of communication.

The team members received weekly reports on their own progress and on that of the team. Within three months the team's total e-mail output dropped by 54%. The output of the 73 other London-based employees soon began decreasing too, even though those employees received no training or feedback. In fact, this drop was even greater—64%. The result was an annual gain of 10,400 man-hours, which translates to a 7% increase in productivity. The new practices soon became embedded in the top team's behavior, and the reductions have been sustained for two years.

The finding that reducing top executives' message outflow causes subordinates to cut back even more suggests a simple, inexpensive approach to easing the e-mail burden and improving efficiency across an organization:

- Teach executives to be more deliberate in their e-mail use.
- Ask them to set a target for reducing the number of messages they send, and include it in their performance goals.
- Give them weekly feedback.

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