

BUSINESS

Is 'inbox zero' the answer to taming the email monster? Not for everyone, experts say

Constantly checking email can sap productivity and increase stress, communications experts say.



Harry Aurora leads iTutor.com in Jericho, which manages communications. A lot of corporations, he says, are struggling with "how to be in touch with their employees the seamless way." Photo Credit: Newsday / Alejandra Villa Loarca

By Victor Ocasio

victor.ocasio@newsday.com

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For many business professionals, email has morphed from an efficient means of communication into a distracting torrent.

This year nearly 240 billion emails a day will be sent worldwide, according to projections from the Radicati Group, a Palo Alto, California, technology market research firm. That's up 4.4 percent over 2018. By the end of 2022, the number will top 333 billion, Radicati projects.

Experts say the influx can sap productivity and increase stress, especially for white-collar workers who are expected to respond to emails after hours.

Keeping up with the barrage of notifications, requests and reminders, spam and those dreaded "reply alls," can be a challenge.

For many businesses, adopting a formal email strategy has been key to taming what Steve Davies, president of Huntington management consulting firm Edge Initiatives, calls the "email monster."

H2M Architects and Engineers CEO Rich Humann, standing, confers with staff, from left, Rabab Zia, Jose Nunez and Liz

Uzzo and intern Madison Schaefer. H2M has 420 employees. "We'll routinely talk internally about not allowing the email communication to completely overwhelm you," Humann said. Photo Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas

Amid this landscape, some see the concept of "inbox zero" as a solution.

The phrase, coined by San Francisco blogger and productivity expert Merlin Mann in the

mid-2000s, refers to a rigorous framework for triaging and organizing emails to reduce the amount of time workers spend tending to their inboxes, leading to fewer distractions and less stress.

To embrace inbox zero, Mann explained in a 2007 Google Tech Talk, stop constantly checking your email. Instead, process email once an hour, or at whatever interval works for you. Don't ever read an email and leave it sitting in your inbox. Instead, take one of these five actions:

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Delete – Delete or archive any messages that you can.

Delegate – Forward those that can be answered by someone else.

Respond – Respond immediately to those that can be answered in two minutes or less.

Defer – Put those that require more time in a folder to be handled later .

Do – Chip away at those in the folder throughout the day, aiming to tackle all of them by day's end.

Time complaints common

Dianna Booher, a Texas-based executive communications coach and business consultant, said complaints about nonstop email communication are common among her clients, who include managers at big-name

Katherine Heaviside, president of Epoch 5 Public Relations in Huntington, says, "I respond to anything, anytime, 24 hours a day ... I would much rather take care of a problem when it first comes up." Photo Credit: Northwell Health

Attorneys Jessica M. Baquet and her husband, John Farinacci, say they have different ways of handling the torrent of emails coming at them. She responds as fast as they come in "to stay

firms including Lockheed Martin, IBM and PepsiCo.

Forty-two percent of workers use their email three to four hours a day, according to a recent survey Booher conducted with the University of Northern Colorado's Social Research Lab. Nearly a third said they spend more than 20 minutes a day looking for an email or an attachment they've lost.

"They seem to be on 24/7, and they're always checking their email," said Booher,

whose upcoming book, "Faster, Fewer, Better Emails: Manage the Volume, Reduce the Stress, Love the Results" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, \$16.95), will include the survey's findings.

Business leaders need to develop a routine that allows them to be responsive and not become a "bottleneck" to productivity in their organization. Allowing themselves to become distracted by email is an equally big problem, she said. If they do, "they are not going to get that core work done — unless responding to email is their job."

Email and social media are "the biggest culprits ... vying for your attention and trying to interrupt your day," agreed Davies, who also runs the Nassau chapter of the Alternative Board, an organization that groups owners of small- to midsize businesses to act as unofficial advisers for each other.

A common mistake business owners make is failing to place a value on their time, one of the few resources they have the ability to control, he said. Standing in the way of that, of course, is establishing the tools and boundaries that prevent wasting time.

"One of the biggest challenges now is, How do you funnel the torrent of communication and information that is coming at you?" Davies said.

The anxiety associated with that torrent is exactly what inbox zero aims to relieve.

The zero does not refer to the number of messages in an inbox, but rather to "the amount of time an employee's brain is in his inbox," according to Mann. Time and attention are finite, so don't confuse your inbox with a "to do" list, he warns.

Conceptually, such a system is great, said Tanya Hertz, assistant professor of business and entrepreneurship at San Diego State University. But, depending on the industry or size of the company, a dedicated system might

on top of it." He sometimes goes hours without glancing at his email so he can focus on other tasks. Photo Credit: Newsday / Alejandra Villa Loarca

not always work.

For many entrepreneurs the ideal of reaching the coveted inbox zero status on a consistent basis is made difficult by the realities of leadership, said Hertz, a serial entrepreneur who teaches classes in organizational behavior and management.

“In concept, zero inbox sounds like a wonderful thing, and it can be,” she said. “However, in practice what we notice is it doesn’t always work that way... it can actually add to some of the stresses of business.

“It can make you feel more exhausted and drained, and it can take you away from the tasks that you should be focusing on.”

Many consultants and time management experts suggest that professionals set aside designated times during the day for reading and responding to emails. A newly proposed "Right to Disconnect" bill would make it illegal for some New York City private employers with 10 or more employees to require workers to respond to digital communications outside of normal work hours, but some industries lack the luxury of being able to disconnect.

“I respond to anything, anytime,” said Katherine Heaviside, president of Epoch 5 Public Relations in Huntington. “To some people that sounds terrible, but I would much rather take care of a problem when it first comes up.”

For communications professionals like Heaviside, who advises clients on crisis management, immediacy in responses regardless of the medium is the name of the game. “That’s your value to your clients,” she said.

Heaviside said that clients “need to reach me not an hour from now, they have to reach me now.”

She makes a habit of forwarding emails better handled by an employee, deleting advertisements and other spam messages, and filing away important messages that can be acted upon later. However, she does have one major gripe with emails.

“I would like to burn at the stake whoever invented the ‘reply all’ button,” she said. “You end up having 40 emails in your inbox all saying nothing.”

Advances in communication technology, even relatively older advances like email, which was introduced in the mid-1970s, have made aspects of running a business easier, but the new pace is relentless, said Richard Humann, president and chief executive of H2M architects + engineers in Melville.

“Back before email, if you were going to communicate with somebody, you wrote them a letter,” he said. “An appropriate communication could’ve been a week. In email world, it’s like in an hour if you’re not getting back

to somebody, you're getting another email asking 'Hey, did you see my last email?' "

Humann, who has been with H2M for 30 years and was named CEO in 2012, said that communicating with the company's roughly 420 employees, many of whom work in offices spread across the metropolitan region, is of paramount importance and is primarily done through email.

"We'll routinely talk internally about not allowing the email communication to completely overwhelm you," Humann said. "If I'm sending around important communication via email, I don't want the staff to say 'well jeez, here's another email! You get bombarded with all sorts of nonsense emails from all over the place.'"

Humann pointed to a recent task that would normally take him an hour and a half to complete, but due to email and other interruptions, was still incomplete near the end of the day.

"You look at your email and now your priorities change," he said.

For Harry Aurora, founder and chief executive of iTutor.com Inc., an online tutoring platform that partners with more than 1,000 school districts in 14 states, managing communications is a major function of the tech company's core business.

"This is what a lot of corporations are already struggling with," said Aurora, who started the firm in 2014. "How to be in touch with their employees the seamless way."

While iTutor's employees all have email accounts, the executive said he prefers newer tools, like Slack or text messaging, when it comes to his daily tasks.

"People who work with me day to day, they know that I always discourage email," Aurora said. For him, business communication is all about being "quick, hands-on and to the point" and "email is really not to the point."

"And I hate those email threads," he said. "I saw this thread in the morning for something back in July. I was like, 'What's going on?'"

Attorney Jessica M. Baquet, a partner at Jaspán Schlesinger LLP in Garden City, said she responds to emails as fast as they come in, and by 11 each night everything in her inbox must be sorted.

"It's so critical that I stay on top of it, because I have so much going on," Baquet said. "If I were to get behind with it, it would be a big problem that I can't really afford to have."

In contrast, her husband, John G. Farinacci, a partner at Ruskin Moscou Faltischek PC in Uniondale, sometimes sets aside an email-free block of time to focus on a task.

"There are times where I have a task to perform which really requires my concentration," Farinacci said. "I tend to not let myself get distracted from what might be going on on my computer screen."

While the spouses have very different approaches to handling their email, both said their methods work for them.

"We're very, very different in that way," Baquet said.

"Her ability to absorb an incoming email while she's working and keep working is actually quite amazing to me," Farinacci said.

Email management tips:

Designate particular times in the day to review emails.

Delete junk or advertisements as soon as you receive them.

Create separate folders for messages that require immediate response and those that will need more long term responses.

Delegate email responses to employees and colleagues better equipped to respond.

Discourage email exchanges better handled with a phone call or in-person meeting.

Unsubscribe from email lists or newsletters you don't read; for those you keep, set up a filter to direct emails containing the word 'unsubscribe' into a folder to be reviewed later.

Email by the numbers

In a 2018 survey by Adobe:

25% of respondents said the most annoying phrase used in work emails is "Not sure if you saw my last email..."

39% found the idea of **inbox zero** to be "relieving;" 24% see it as "impossible"

49% check their email "every few hours" outside normal work hours

72% said email was the preferred method of work communication, with face-to-face conversations and phone calls coming in at 61% and 60%, respectively



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