

Not too many months ago, all our complaining about e-mail overload came down to gripes and jokes about spam: ads for magical diet programs and work-from-home riches; earnest pleas from sons of Nigerian cabinet ministers who needed our help to release millions from government treasuries; plugs for discounted Viagra—sorry, Vi@gra—and other products whose use implied sexual inadequacy. Our inboxes runneth over with messages no one wanted to receive; every morning began with a massive delete, followed by panic that we'd inadvertently erased that one crucial e-mail for which we'd been waiting.

IT people struggled to keep up with perpetrators who always seemed two steps ahead, easily finding new ways around frantically passed legislation and service providers that kept redoubling efforts. Sending out an average of 175 billion messages each day in late 2009, spammers threatened to obviate all of e-mail's promised benefits.

And then, thanks to smarter filters and creative thinking by people at Google and elsewhere, the problem faded away. "Surprise! We Won the War on Spam," *Slate* announced last November. The billions—trillions!—of spam messages continue to flow, but few make it all the way to our inboxes. There's a reason why we no longer whine about daily offers to enlarge our penises.

So why are we still whining about e-mail overload? Because our inboxes remain stuffed—and now we can't simply delete three-quarters of it without thinking. Each day's e-mail dump now resembles what the U.S. postal service used to deliver in the snail-mail era: a handful of personal letters and important papers, half-drowned in an ocean of catalogs and newsletters and circulars and offers and solicitations—each just relevant enough to require sorting through one piece at a time. In other words: junk mail.

For our cover story, "Is It the Weekend Yet?," John Buchanan spoke with veteran executives to learn how their workdays and weeks had changed over the years; the biggest development, he found, was that people today are working endless hours, and the main culprit is junk mail. We're swamped with communication, and every memo, e-newsletter, announcement, cc: or bcc:, and press release demands at least a moment's attention. It adds up to train commutes spent thumbing BlackBerries rather than reading and reflecting, to mornings that don't get truly productive till 10:30, to vacations that aren't. At a time when our organizations need us to be focused and thoughtful, coping with the tide of chatter is infinitely distracting.

Of course, solutions have sprouted, from software programs that lock out users until specified times to self-help books exhorting readers to steel themselves against Outlook's siren call. And more features such as Google's new Priority Inbox will help us sort the good stuff from the less-good stuff.

But it strikes me that what needs to change is not our software but our attitude toward communication, which currently puts the onus on recipients rather than on senders. The problem isn't that we're all cc'ing each other on every afterthought following a meeting—it's that there's an assumption that we'll all be closely following the back-and-forth as each new message pops up onscreen. Those sending e-mail too often behave as though the act of tapping the "send" button discharges them of all responsibility: *It's their problem now*.

We shouldn't take steps to restrict, or even discourage, memos and cc's. At some point down the road, all that correspondence could prove valuable for any number of reasons; it's worth keeping on file, tucked away in some folder or other. But recipients, whether via software or by hand, should feel safe prioritizing what to read—and leaving most messages permanently unopened. And senders should stop expecting that every addressee will open and read every message.




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