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## Kicking bad e-mail habits

by Patricia Pickett

Marsha Egan is trying to help people get over their e-mail addiction and break bad habits that drain their time and cause them to lose productivity.

Egan, founder of [The Egan Group Inc.](#), a professional coaching firm in Reading, Penn., developed e-mail productivity teleseminars after clients started telling her that e-mail inundation is often an obstacle in their personal and professional lives.

E-mail is a powerful tool but can monopolize people's time if they don't know how to use it properly, Egan said. "To my knowledge, I don't know that there are many training sessions where people have been given suggestions on how to be productive with their e-mail." Left to their own devices on how to manage e-mail, users have adopted habits that consume individual and company time, she said.

One habit is hoarding items, unorganized, in one's inbox, said Egan, noting that she recently spoke with one individual who had 3,500 items in his inbox. "By leaving those items in your inbox, it almost lets the inbox control you."

Many people deal with overflowing inboxes by engaging in an activity Egan calls "noodling": skimming up and down the inbox to see if there is anything they can quickly eliminate. "Before you know it, you have spent an hour and a half cleaning out your e-mail," Egan said. However, it is still often difficult to find important items in the midst of everything else being stored, she said.

E-mail also causes interruptions, which can be a costly problem, Egan said. When an e-mail arrives and the alert sounds, people often immediately check to see who has written to them. Getting over this interruption is more difficult than one would think, she said. "It is commonly believed that to recover from any interruption takes about four minutes." For a person who receives 30 e-mails a day, the interruption recovery time adds up to 120 minutes: a staggering number, Egan said.

Unnecessary copying of e-mails to three or four extra people -- "just to make sure they know about something" -- is another bad habit, said Egan. "(Those extra people) have to read it and figure out if it is important or not....If you think you are being helpful, you are actually creating more work." The same goes for "chain e-mails" which have several memos attached below, unedited, with the note "please see below" at the top. The onus is on the recipient to figure out what is important, Egan said. Vague subject lines and main points buried in the middle of e-mail are also time and effort wasters, making it difficult for the recipient to sort the e-mail and figure out what is important, she said.

So how do people regain control of their inboxes?

To control interruptions, Egan recommended that users turn off the automatic send and receive function and instead set download intervals at 90 minutes or two hours. Users can still click on Send/Receive when they are expecting an e-mail to arrive, but recovery time after distraction will be drastically minimized, she said.

Users should also avoid viewing their inbox as a "holding tank" for their work and instead treat it as a delivery box. Instead of deciding that an e-mail can't be dealt with immediately and marking it unread, only to leave it in the inbox and look at it seven to 10 times more, Egan recommended putting viewed e-mail into another folder to look at later.

Users should also copy only the people who need to be copied, make sure the subject line is very clear and clean up e-mails before sending them, keeping the reader in mind. And they shouldn't forget that sometimes a problem can be better solved by just picking up the phone, since e-mail can often be misinterpreted.

The bottom line is, people must change their views about what e-mail is in order to start managing their inbox, instead of allowing e-mail to manage them. "Many look at 'doing e-mail' as a task, while what e-mail really does is deliver the task," Egan said.

Egan noted that small businesses are probably able to fix e-mail productivity problems faster than larger firms because of the relative ease of communication and agreement on best practices.

More information on e-mail productivity and Egan's teleseminars on the topic can be found on the [Egan E-mail Solutions](#) web site.