

E m a i l O v e r l o a d

By William Powell

Last week, I caught myself daydreaming about a benevolent network failure that would zap my Outlook inbox and free me of hundreds of emails that have been accumulating over the past year. What could it mean? If self-help Websites and pop psychology have taught me anything, it's that when you start dreaming of disasters you're likely facing an overwhelming situation. For me, it's email. So, considering that demographically I often find myself bellying up to the

biggest piece of the pie chart, it's safe to assume that many of you are probably facing the same difficulty. Sisyphus had his rock; we each have an inbox that despite our best efforts never drops below half full. (What can I say? I'm an optimist.) Of course, I've tried to make a clean start before, which lasted for a week, or, at most, a month. But this time, I'm not fooling around. I'm not waiting until January to add it to my laundry list of resolutions, and neither should you.

Seeking professional help, I contacted Andy Kaufman (no, not the late comedian), director of the Institute for Leadership Excellence and Development and author of the e-book *How to Organize Your Inbox and Get Rid of E-Mail Clutter*. Kaufman was on the road for speaking engagements, so despite attempts to conduct an interview by phone, we settled, naturally, on email.

I should note that in sending my questions to Kaufman, I had to delete several messages from my inbox just to have the email sent and avoid an all-too-familiar message that states I've exceeded my allotted capacity.

T+D When you're in bad shape to start, feeling overwhelmed, what's the first thing you should do?

Kaufman The first thing most people need to do is change how they think about email, or personal organization, or any of a dozen things that can cause you to be a victim of email overload.

Let's be clear: Email overload isn't an inevitable option. You can try to blame it on the relentless spammers in cyberspace or the culture of your organization, but bottom-line, email is a tool to help you, not enslave you. If your organization's culture is such that you're getting way too many emails than you can keep up with, there's a problem in the organization perhaps. And there could also be a problem with the people.

There's only one person on the face of this Earth who can, ultimately, reduce email overload and clutter in your life, and that's you. It's not your boss's responsibility. It's not your ISP's responsibility. It's yours and yours alone. Swallow that potentially bitter pill and you're ready to take the next steps.

I don't care how many
smiley faces you put
in your messages, email isn't a
rich communication
medium.



Andy Kaufman

T+D What are your suggestions for staying on top of email once your inbox is cleaned out and organized? Also, dealing with email is time-consuming, often cutting into time better spent on other tasks. How can users adjust their approach and attitude regarding email that will free them from being slaves to their inboxes?

Kaufman David Allen [a speaker and personal productivity expert] taught me the idea of the zero-based inbox. The idea is you're constantly draining your inbox to empty every 24 to 48 hours. That requires a process and some discipline, but it's incredibly powerful when implemented. More detail on that concept is in the e-book or for free at www.i-leadonline.com/newsletter/0207.htm.

We have to address the issue about email time better spent on other tasks. "Hey, I have real work to do!" is an implied mindset in that question. It's important to realize that keeping up with your email is... a very real part of your job now. I advise people to block out time on their calendars. We willingly [allot] calendar time for wasted meetings, yet we too rarely set up appointments with ourselves to commit the time we need to do our jobs.

T+D I've tried flagging emails for follow-up and creating subfolders to route and store email, but it's not working for me.

What am I doing wrong? Do you believe in using those functions?

Kaufman It's not a matter of what you're doing wrong; you're on the right track of trying to find ways to let your computer do the work for you. Automatically routing email to subfolders is a great idea. I like to say, "The answer is never a tool." Automating tasks via Rules is also a great idea, but setting up those rules without other actions in place just spreads the garbage. The key is to have a plan for how to review subfolders in a way that lets you take action on the items some time before your next birthday. It's possible.

T+D What can we do to stop generating unnecessary email that just fills up co-workers' inboxes?

Kaufman One of the best ways to reduce clutter is to halt it before it shows up. In my book, chapter 8, "Five Key Questions to Reduce Email Clutter," goes through five questions to ask every time you're about to draft an email message. ["TRASH Your Email and Other Email Reminders."](#)

Question 3 is Who really needs to know this? That's when clicking the Reply to All button unnecessarily clutters the box of others. Asking who really needs to know this and answering with an honest list [of recipients] can reduce mountains

of email within your team and organization. We're copied on way too many messages that don't sufficiently pertain to us.

T+D When should you use email, and when should you just pick up the phone or walk over to someone's office?

Kaufman Here's the guideline: The more sensitive the issue, the richer the medium. I don't care how many smiley faces you put in your messages, email isn't a rich communication medium. In fact, it's one of the weakest. One-on-one in person is

the richest medium because you can hear the person's words and tone, and observe body language. Before you make a default selection of using email, consider whether the issue is sensitive enough to warrant a different communication channel.

T+D Is there something I can do to reduce back-and-forth replies?

Kaufman If a message is getting too deep with replies to replies to replies, jump in and pull the necessary people together using a richer medium. Also, get your team

together and talk about the issue. Set a threshold such that if a message thread gets deeper than a certain level, people need to talk to each other. Model it. Confront it when it's not followed.

T+D What do you suggest regarding emails people want to save? I don't want to print them out and create a pile of paper.

Kaufman Keep in mind that most folder systems, whether paper-based or electronic, are filled with junk that you'll never refer to again. I advise people to honestly assess whether they really need to keep a message. Storing messages in electronic folders has a strong advantage in that these folders can be searched quickly by the email tool. Printing loses that advantage.

T+D Why is staying on top of email so difficult for people even if they're successful at staying on top of other tasks? Is it the volume? Is there something about email that's more time-consuming, more difficult to manage?

Kaufman Certainly volume is an issue. In the three seconds or so it takes to read this sentence, more than a half-million emails will find a home in inboxes around the world. It's estimated that by 2005, nearly that many will land each second. The email overload that we all feel won't take care of itself; it will get worse.

Funny thing, though, other demands for our time aren't generally decreasing. I believe that life tends to scale faster than our ability to keep up with it. Remember cramming in school? It got us by, so we might find that cramming helps us deliver during our first job. But then we're assigned more stuff. Suddenly, cramming doesn't work. We change, get our feet under us, and just when we're getting good at doing one thing at a

TRASH Your Email and Other Email Reminders

Everyone from your mom to your boss has a theory on how to handle email. Though most of the suggestions are sound, they're easily forgotten. Here are two lists that Kaufman suggests you consider in your battle to reduce email overload. Clip this out, and tape it to your monitor.

Achieve victory over email overload by using the T-R-A-S-H process:

- T**—Toss it! (Delete it now, not later.)
- R**—Refer it! (Give it to someone more qualified.)
- A**—Take ACTION now!
- S**—Store it! (Save it in a place where you can easily find it.)
- H**—Halt it from coming in the first place!

Ask these key questions before sending an email:

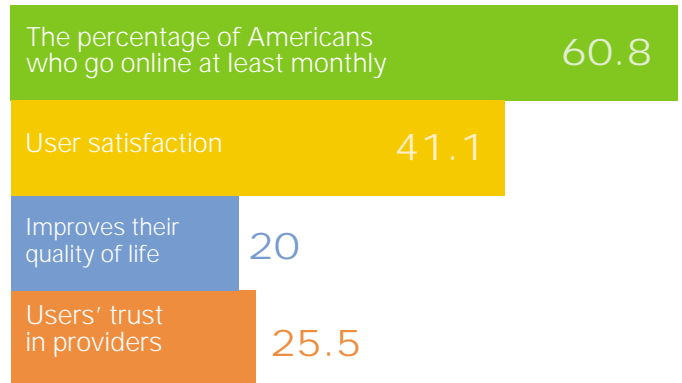
1. Does this really need to be communicated?
2. Is email really the best way to communicate it?
3. Who really needs to know this?
4. What's the most appropriate content?
5. How can I best help the recipient take action on this?

Source: www.i-leadonline.com

Which Way the Net Goes

The Conference Board's new indicator of consumer Internet usage, the Consumer Internet Barometer, follows in the footsteps of the organization's successful Consumer Confidence Index. The inaugural release appeared in October following third-quarter 2002 results. Measurements are based on data taken during the fourth quarter of 2001. The report is produced jointly by NFO WorldGroup, Forrester Research, and the Conference Board.

The backbone of the barometer tracks consumer usage, satisfaction, and trust, though more specific elements are tracked in the full report. Current readings from the barometer are encouraging. The percentage of Americans who go



online at least monthly has increased, up nearly 3 percent from the end of last year, to 60.8 percent. User satisfaction is up as well, to 41.1 percent. More specifically, nearly 20 percent of consumers who use the Internet primarily for work and work-related activities feel it significantly improves their quality of life.

The only downturn in the barometer, which comes as little surprise, is in the area of consumer trust. Overall, users' trust in the providers of their primary Internet activity, such as shopping or online games, is down slightly to 25.5 percent.

The report will be generated quarterly.

More/www.consumerinternetbarometer.us

time, we're promoted and have to do multiple things. Then perhaps we get married. And have kids. And then they fool us into letting them play sports, so we spend weekends driving from field to pool to gymnasium. Then they become teenagers. Arghhh!

For most of us, email has scaled beyond our ability to keep up with it. If we want different results, we have to take different actions.

William Powell is an associate editor of T+D; wpowell@astd.com.

@Work covers Internet technology trends, news, and tips. Send comments, questions, and items of interest to atwork@astd.org.

QuickTip

This month's quick tip doesn't cover the Internet or email, but it's such a handy thing to know I thought I'd throw it out there. Windows users can quickly **switch between open programs** by using the Alt and Tab keys. Hold down the Alt key and press the Tab key. A menu with a list of open applications will appear. Continue to hold the Alt key and press the Tab key to **move between apps**. When you hit the one you want, release the Alt key. **The application appears.**