

Overwhelmed With Email?

Steve Yoder, The Fiscal Times 11/14/12



Last month, the CEO of the start-up Learning as Leadership, Shayne Hughes, tried an experiment with his employees: No internal email for an entire week.

Instead, workers actually had to leave their desks and talk to people. What he discovered was that after one week, employees seemed happier, less stressed, and more productive — all from the simple solution to limit email.

Hughes initiated the experiment after learning that internal email represents 50 to 75 percent of all electronic communication and can be a major time suck for employees. The average knowledge worker spends about 28 percent of his workweek managing his inbox, according to a study released in July by the McKinsey Global Institute.

Checking email is addictive, akin to a slot machine, says Scott Crabtree of Happy Brain Science, which trains organizations on productivity and happiness. Out of a hundred emails, almost all are routine and don't need your attention. But a small minority either require urgent action or announce good news, flooding your brain with reward chemicals like dopamine, he says.

The next time you get a popup announcing a new email, you'll interrupt what you're doing to check it because there's a chance you'll be rewarded. Jakob Nielsen, an Internet usability specialist who targets information pollution, claims that a "one-minute interruption can easily cost a knowledge worker 10 to 15 minutes of lost productivity due to the time needed to reestablish mental context and reenter the flow state."

Technology has done more than distract workers from their tasks—it has accelerated communication into what some think is a primitive shorthand. The flood of information and demand for quicker response times mean that more workers, especially the youngest, are using a range of communications tools to juggle several tasks at once. Depending on which school of experts you believe, that adaptation will either boost output or lead to a long-term decline in

productivity.

If the working population is in a grand experiment of always-on connectivity, then millennials (those born around 1980) are largely serving as the lab mice. Younger workers tend to use more technology on the job and multi-task, says Carson Tate, based on her experience training organizations as a partner at the productivity training organization Working Simply.

Some observers think that younger workers' ability to handle multiple incoming information streams represents how the workers of the future will operate. Their constant use of social media has given them information-processing abilities that are the equivalent of modern digital "packet switching" technology, says Morley Winograd, co-author of *Millennial Momentum: How a New Generation is Remaking America*.

Packet switching involves breaking up data into chunks before transmission and prioritizing it based on importance. For younger workers, he says that means they're able to quickly take in incoming data and either file or discard it – and when new information comes in on top of that, they're able to more quickly switch their attention to it than are older workers, he says.

One CEO goes so far as to say that attention deficit disorder, far from being a disadvantage, may help boost productivity in firms when channeled properly. "If you can learn how to manage it and turn it into tool for yourself, everybody wins," says William Schrader, who founded early Internet giant PSINet and now serves as CEO of LeaseWeb, a startup hosting service. Multitasking is what CEOs do every day, he adds: He often has no more than 30 seconds to focus on any task. The key to successful multitasking, he says, is quickly but accurately sizing up and attending to what's important.

Others think our brains are adapting, but in the wrong direction. Edwin M. Hallowell, M.D., author of *Crazy Busy*, says that people can handle only two low-level tasks at once, and John Medina, Ph.D., author of *Brain Rules*, agrees. "You can show that people on projects that are trying to multitask make twice as many errors and it takes them twice as long to get something done."

"We said more is better, let's let employees be connected all the time and increase the speed of communication," says Nicholas Carr, author of the 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. "The excitement about that has been tempered by the awareness that productivity and innovation can be negatively affected by these [communication] tools." All of the constant attention switching, he thinks, is making us less able to do the deep

analytical thinking that is the stuff of creativity.

PERFORMANCE METRICS

Indeed, there's a growing body of research indicating that multi-tasking cuts into performance. Videogamers, who might be expected to have highly developed attention-switching skills, perform worse when multitasking than they do otherwise, according to a study in the July issue of the research journal *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*. And a study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that multitasking took a toll on the short-term memories of people between the ages of 60 and 80.

Tate notes that the CEOs she's worked with tell her they rarely get their important creative insights during fractured workdays. Instead, "those occur when they're running, when they're in the shower, when they're on vacation... They don't happen when they're going from one idea to the next."

The disagreement over the effects of the new communications tools on workers is bigger than just a few experts – it appears to be common across those who study the issue. In February, the Pew Research Center released a survey of more than 1,000 Internet experts and other Internet users.

Among respondents, 55 percent thought that the brains of multitasking teens and young adults are wired differently from people older than 35 and that they don't suffer cognitive shortcomings because of multitasking. But 42 percent said that while younger people's brains are wired differently, their hyperconnectivity is yielding "baleful results" – they don't retain information, are easily distracted, and lack deep-thinking ability.

That philosophical argument is showing up in the real world. "Millennials get frustrated that others can't juggle things faster, more effectively, and people of my generation and older get frustrated that Millennials can't be in a meeting without checking their phone under the table," says Crabtree. –Leslie Handmaker, a 38-year-old manager at printing company Next Day Flyers, banned communication devices from her team's meetings. It's Gen-Xers and baby boomers like her in managerial positions who are calling the shots. They're also more likely to bring in people of older generations: A survey of 500 hiring managers by job placement firm Adecco found that hiring managers are three times as likely to hire a mature worker (60 percent) as a Millennial (20 percent).

Ultimately, technology itself might address some concerns of those worried about the always-on workplace culture. Researchers from Indiana and Tufts Universities and MIT have developed a wearable brain scanner that detects

when workers are overwhelmed with multitasking and offloads some of the work to a computer. And Carr says that phone apps like Freedom (which locks a user off the Internet) and Instapaper (which downloads a clean version of a document for later reading) could also help.

If they don't, Crabtree thinks it's possible we could see a longer term downward slide in worker output: "The fear is that our productivity is going to consistently drop and we won't even really notice it or figure out why because we're dizzy from all the multitasking."

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