

Chapter 2

Email Overload: Framing the Concept and Solving the Problem – A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter email overload is presented as a component of information overload and some of its causes and consequences are identified. Furthermore, an analysis on the skills required to deal with information overload is made. Then, a critical literature review about the concept of email overload is realized, stressing aspects such as the amount of messages, personal characteristics and skills or technological issues. Solutions for this organizational problem are presented based on relevant case studies from the literature review. Key components to consider in email overload management are also identified, including information management techniques and technological options, training, time management and information behavior (individual and organizational).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2061-0.ch002

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, information environment can be characterized by its super connectivity. Due not only to the multiplication of mobile devices that access information (laptops, notebooks, tablets, smartphones, and other gadgets), but also to the significant improvements involving access to wireless communication networks, with an almost complete geographical coverage in most developed countries, at an increasingly low cost. This environment, where information is available on the Internet without temporal or physical boundaries and with a minimum degree of effort and investment, presents new challenges for individuals who have to respond to constant requests and need to know how to focus their attention and processing capacity. In this sense, information overload is the flip side of the value of open communication channels.

In organizational and professional contexts, the use of information and communication technologies has resulted in the diversification of means of communication (letter, telephone, fax, SMS, email, instant messaging, etc.). Thus, organizational communication, both internal and external, has become more immediate, informal and intense (Ramsey, Hair, Renaud, 2008). Edmunds and Morris (2000), from a literature review on information overload in business organizations, claim that this abundance of information, instead of better enabling people to do their jobs, threatens to engulf and diminish his or her control over the situation. Based on this finding, it is important to understand what information overload in a professional environment is and how it materializes. Given the intensity of email use within organizations, it is certainly relevant to study it to understand information overload.

In recent decades, email became omnipresent in personal and organizational lives thus contributing to information overload. In this sense, managing emails remains a major challenge for organizations (Sumecki, Chipulo, Ojiko, 2011). By the late nineties, organizations' investments in email services were supported by communication costs savings. When compared with the use of phone, it definitely increases the information flows speed, resulting therefore in an increase in employees' productivity. But over time, this perspective has been rethought considering the experience with organizations' daily routine. In fact, because of its socio-technical features, email has become invasive due to the number of daily messages received and sent, and the time spent. Email overload became a reality. Nevertheless, both organizations and their employees recognize email as an essential source of corporate information for the daily functioning in all of its dimensions. As such, this informational asset needs to be managed, integrating a comprehensive approach to the organization's information management strategy.

In order to accomplish this, it is important to understand the concept of email overload and its relation with information overload. After a literature review about information overload and email overload, solutions to cope with the amount of

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