

Turning Manure into Gold: how to survive the email wars

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Many of us are suffering from indigestion of email: our In boxes are bloated, we are constantly jerked every which way by the latest messages, and what little time isn't spent reading and responding to email is spent endlessly sorting and deleting messages instead of doing the productive work that gives us the satisfaction to show up every day.

So what can you do? With these simple survival measures, you can turn email back into the wonderful tool that it seemed to be when it became prevalent in the 1980s.

1. Slow down:

By being hyper-responsive, we all become part of the problem (and lose any time for creative work). Turn off the "feature" that automatically checks your mail, or set it for no less than two hours. Think before replying: what value am I adding, or am I just part of the noise?

2. Use headers properly: Make sure that you initiate messages with short, descriptive headers. In some cases like meeting confirmations, all people will have to read is the header. When you get a message with an inappropriate subject line, fix it, as in: "How to use email creatively [was: this sucks!]".

3. Create the missing features:

- no "reply to all" function: It would be best if we could disable it, but just don't use it. Only cc: those who really need to read the reply. For the rest, you'll just be part of the problem.

- see what's "to:" you versus what's "cc:" to you: create a filter in your mail software so that messages that have you in the to: field are a different color or have a different priority (I use lowest) than other messages. Work on these first. By not being responsive to messages that you are cc:d on, you're also training everyone to use "to:" and "cc:" more appropriately.

- fcc: I'd love to see a "fake carbon copy" feature which is the reverse of "blind carbon copy". It lists the boss for those messages that need a little of that intimidation factor, but the boss doesn't have to read that extra bit of mail. Since this feature doesn't exist, just don't bother to cc: the boss in these situations.

4. Read from last to first: Sort unread messages by subject, then read up from the bottom. Usually, you just need to read the last message. I use Eudora on a Mac, so I can option-click on a subject to get the whole thread, then read up.

5. Stop sorting email: Many of us spend a lot of our days patiently sorting email into folders. With modern search engines built into mail software, this isn't really necessary any more, especially if we were to all use better subject lines, send less mail, and so forth. My approach for this is to create an archive folder for the in and out mailboxes for each calendar year. I move mail to archive every three to six months, keeping at least the past month or two for ready access. I stopped sorting almost exactly ten years ago. I really value the time saved, I've spent very little time looking for old messages, and I've always been successful when I've looked for something.

6. Viral marketing: better use of email is contagious, and it will spread more quickly if we would all gently point out possible behavioral improvements, without cc:ing the world, of course. This applies to inappropriate use of subject lines, excessive cc: lists, using to: for huge lists instead of using bcc:, forwarding hoaxes without checking whether they are hoaxes (which they usually are if there is a long thread of forwards and cc:'s), and so forth.