



transforming business by transforming e-mail

Whitepaper
E-mail Overload in the Workplace:
Top Three Problems



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Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.

There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.

- Peter Drucker

1. Introduction

The term 'e-mail bankruptcy' was popularized by Lawrence Lessig, a prominent attorney/professor. He decided his inbox was unmanageable, deleted everything and started over. This was 2004! Not much has changed since that time other than the volume of e-mail, which has and continues to increase exponentially! The Radacati group reported that daily global e-mail volume of 210 billion messages will double by 2012.

Most people do not have the luxury of deleting all their mail. A wholesale repudiation of one's e-mail however tempting can be very detrimental to reputation, livelihood, relationships, and productivity of other workers. Even if deleting all e-mail was an option, up until recently, there has been no reasonable exit strategy to e-mail bankruptcy. Current techniques for managing e-mail are merely palliatives for the root problem. The drivers of e-mail volume are not improving but in fact worsening. Trends of globalization, decentralized decision making, mobile and virtual workforce, flat organizations, workforce reductions (and fewer assistants), fast changing priorities, among others conspire to drive up e-mail traffic; plus it is much less of an imposition to send an e-mail than to make a phone call.

The problem many professionals face is how to manage e-mail, not be managed by it. Time is a zero sum game. You can spend your time on e-mail or spend it on something else. What is your preference?

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to circumvent e-mail. E-mail is the most heavily used mode of business communication. Corporate e-mail users on average receive 126 e-mail per day (excluding spam) and spend more than 41% of their time managing e-mail [Radicati Group]. The irony of the situation is that e-mail is now also considered to be the # 1 productivity killer in the work place. It is estimated that one minute of interruption costs 15 minutes of productivity. This threat to business productivity is further compounded by the fact that more than half of these e-mail are not a priority to the user.

The impact of increasing volumes of e-mail has other negative cascading effects in addition to interrupting workflow. Most e-mail carries a presumed expectation of response. As e-mail keep piling up while a user performs tasks other than e-mail, the ability of the recipients to prioritize

and intelligently respond to messages declines. In addition, time is wasted sorting through and reading unimportant e-mail. The result is that many e-mail are simply never answered or answered late, delaying important decisions or creating misunderstandings between co-workers, vendors and most importantly customers. This can have a negative financial impact and lead to an exasperating, stressful and unhealthy work situation.

2. Scope

This whitepaper discusses major root causes of e-mail overload problems widespread at corporations and government agencies. The findings and analysis are based on the insights gained providing e-mail productivity and business intelligence software to a wide variety of customers.

The problem of too much e-mail and inadequate tools results in significant amounts of unproductive behavior.

3. Findings & Analysis

Three e-mail productivity killers in the workplace top our list, according to research by C-MAIL:

a) Problem #1: Lack of e-mail prioritization

The root cause of the e-mail overload problem is us, our powerful psychological tendencies. Fear and uncertainty and/or the need for instant gratification are powerful drivers for constantly checking one's e-mail. These taken together with a constant flow of e-mail encourage unproductive behaviors which include interrupting your concentration and your work to check e-mail, wasting time and impairing decision-making.

Fast response to important matters is a requirement for most businesses. For example, sensitivity to response time is particularly high during difficult economic times when keeping existing customers is challenging and finding new customers even harder. Constantly checking e-mail assuages the concern that something important is being missed. In the process of checking for important e-mail however, one must wade through unimportant items and in the process something less important may be addressed because it is easy or convenient.

On the other hand, responding to e-mail can also provide a sense of accomplishment however real or imagined. Checking e-mail is an addictive behavior, particularly with mobile devices. An

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e-mail we can immediately read or reply to from the office or on the move, regardless of importance can be instantly rewarding. However, quick e-mail checking or response offers a false sense of achievement and a false sense of control. In spite of working on many e-mail many times during the workday, many people wonder by the end of a day, what they have accomplished, and question the value of their contribution.

The problem is that all too often, people disrupt their activity to check e-mail and then switchback to the activity thus eroding their productivity. This behavior tends to feed on itself leading to further distraction and delayed decision making on important e-mail. The use of mobile devices in meetings to check non critical e-mail is not only a distraction but dilutes the quality of decision making.

Research (refer Fig 3.1) indicates that more than 53% of the e-mail you receive is not a high priority to you. However we still tend to read and respond to these “easy” or low priority e-mail first. These unimportant e-mail distract you and take your time and focus away from the e-mail that are really important and awaiting your immediate attention.

The end result, according to our research, is that approximately 18% of important e-mail goes unread or is seriously delayed, whereas approximately 36% of unimportant e-mail is being read.

Perhaps an important customer e-mail or an important business idea went unread because a manager was busy reading non-priority e-mail.

To be productive, you need to control your e-mail addiction and Prioritize, Prioritize, Prioritize! In combination with personal behavior traits that have become the norm, in both business and personal lives.

Prioritization can be done automatically, resulting in significant time savings and avoiding hassles of constantly setting complex rules & filters that may not keep up with your fast changing priorities.

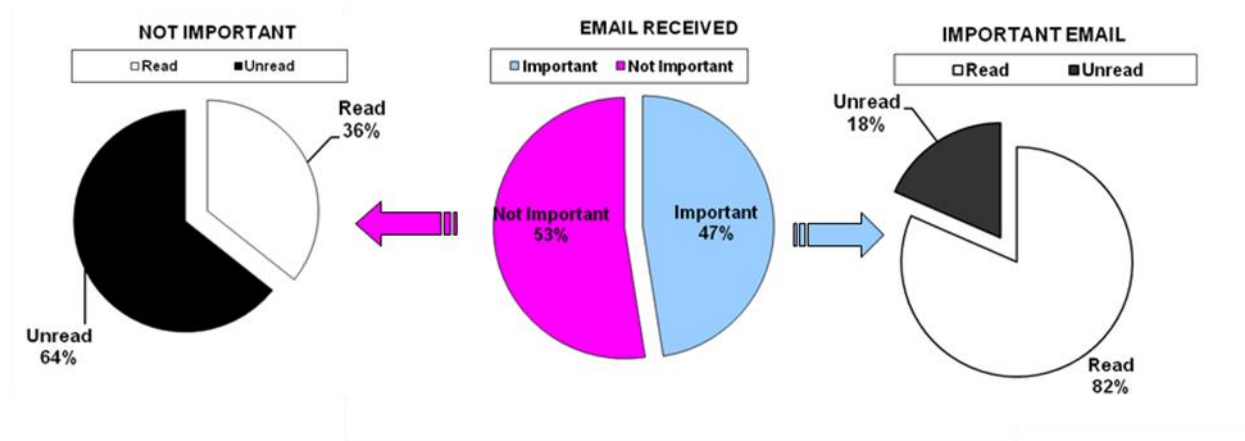


Figure 3.1: E-mail reading behavior of a busy corporate user (Source: Messagemind, Inc.)

Messagemind’s C-MAIL Dynamic Prioritization™ technology automatically sorts and organizes e-mail within your MS Outlook™ and mobile devices. Smart technology learns your fast changing priorities from your prior e-mail history, clicking behavior, easy feedback mechanism to adjust priorities, and the company’s business rules.

3.2 Problem #2: Treating your Inbox as an unfocused To-do list

Almost 50% of your important e-mail requires some action other than just reading it. For one reason or another, you cannot complete all the relevant actions at the time the e-mail is read. Based on our experience, typical behavior is that approximately one-half of the actions to be taken have to be spread out over the next few days or weeks depending upon their priority.

These To-do tasks are co-mingled with new incoming e-mail clogging your mailbox thus turning it into an unfocused To-do list. This in turn leads to excess time spent either determining which e-mail are high priorities or constantly searching for actionable e-mail; raising your anxiety levels by searching for time sensitive e-mail. This gives the individual the feeling of lack of control over their deliverables creating stress and anxiety.

To increase your productivity, it is very important that you separate action items from other e-mail from within your inbox. Once this is done, you will have a focused to-do list that can be completed much more effectively.

Some productivity pundits recommend “zero inbox” or “clean inbox” philosophy, we respectfully disagree. We do not think it is practical or even recommended today when you receive and

send a high volume of e-mail. How does emptying your inbox contribute to your firm's profitability, innovation or competitive advantage? It is unnecessary if you have the right tools.

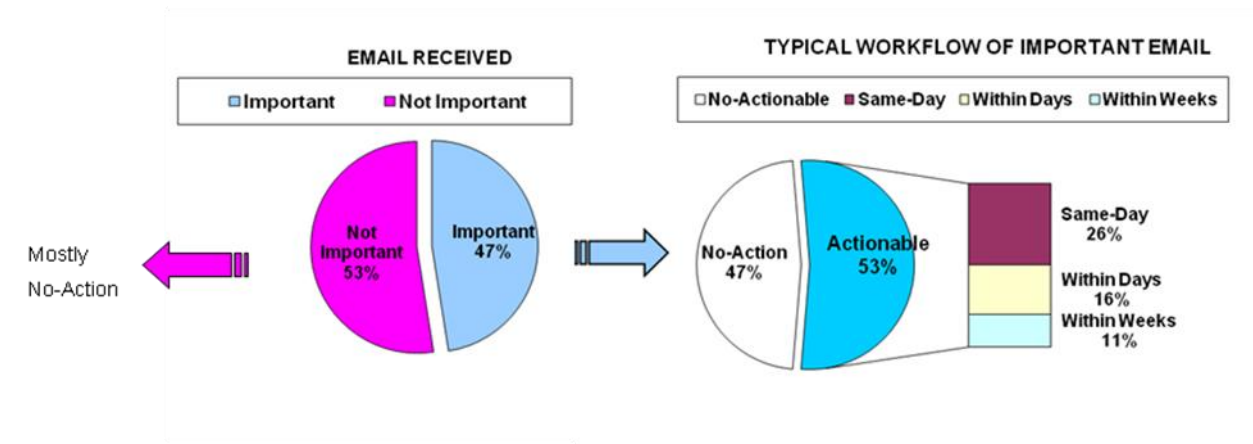


Figure 3.2 Findings: Workflow of a busy corporate user (Source: Messagemind Inc.)

Smart prioritization software such as Messagemind's C-MAIL, can save time in going through each unimportant e-mail and deleting it, or filing actionable e-mail in a separate folder only to find that you have to create more folders to store deferred actions, pending actions, completed actions - the list can go on.

C-MAIL software provides a smart workflow within MS Outlook™. You can plan actions (To-Do, Defer, Delegate or Complete) with a single-click. Actionable e-mail are shown in a user friendly way within Outlook, sorted by priority, helping you stay focused on your most important actions and decisions. Actions completed are moved out of your view. Smart archiving and folder management take care of the mailbox housekeeping, freeing up your time and keeping your mailbox lean and clean. This automation can mimic the approaches recommended by productivity consultants such as David Allen's Get Things Done® (GTD®).

c) Problem #3: Lack of Productivity Goals, Policy & Measurement

We often confuse "Goals" and "Objectives", with "Priorities". A "Goal" is long range predetermined outcome, a specific target to be achieved by a specific date. "Objectives" are intermediate targets with shorter time frames, to achieve a specific goal. Priorities are "Objectives" that have been ranked in order of importance. Your most important and urgent objective, is your top priority [reference: The Time Trap, Third Edition, by Alec Mackenzie]



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Most goals of individuals are driven by their organization's strategic goals and may in turn be driven by division or department goals. Establishing specific goals is absolutely critical for establishing priorities, which in turn decides how you and your workforce spend time. As mentioned before, most of the work and critical communication flows through mailboxes, and is therefore not a surprise that workforce spends 41% or more of their work time on e-mail.

The problem is that organizations neither set clear e-mail productivity goals and policies (a must-have for effective prioritization) nor do they have a mechanism to measure performance levels. What cannot be identified cannot be corrected. What cannot be measured cannot be improved.

Let's discuss this further with an example: You have 3 unread e-mail in your mailbox. One e-mail is from an important customer requesting a proposal. The second e-mail from your HR department requesting your training calendar. And the third e-mail is from your friend who has sent you their vacation photos.

Some people may say, well, looking at my friend's vacation picture gives me motivation to work harder, so I will read it first! Some people may say: this customer is always complaining, so I will read their e-mail later or maybe I will get to it next week. Some say: Let me clear easy low priority e-mails first and clean my mailbox, before I start working on high priority e-mail.

Just take the above example, and imagine the magnitude of productivity loss when employees have to decide their priority from hundreds of e-mail every day. A 60,000 employee global company recently estimated 15 minutes of productivity loss per day causing a \$150 million loss per year. It is even more important for customer and supply chain operations, where an individual's "time to action" delay can cause a serious cascade impact in "customer relations" or "time-to-market". Therefore impacting the overall organization's effectiveness and affecting stakeholder and shareholder value.

The point here is that their workforce spends 41% or more of their time on e-mail, most of their actions and decisions flow through their mailboxes. A lack of target performance levels and a lack of measurement will only result in the workforce making assumptions, often leading to individual priorities not aligned with the organization's goals, including overall performance and direction.

Messagemind helps companies and users set productivity goals and policies based on best practices. Unique patent pending technology automatically analyzes the e-mail flow and user actions, and provides measurements and analytics on individual and group productivity & collaboration levels. Customizable reports track key service level performance metrics, map work relationships among project team members, and identify any bottlenecks in the communication flow. With Messagemind you have real-time visibility to individual and group priorities, and a platform to align individual and organization priorities.

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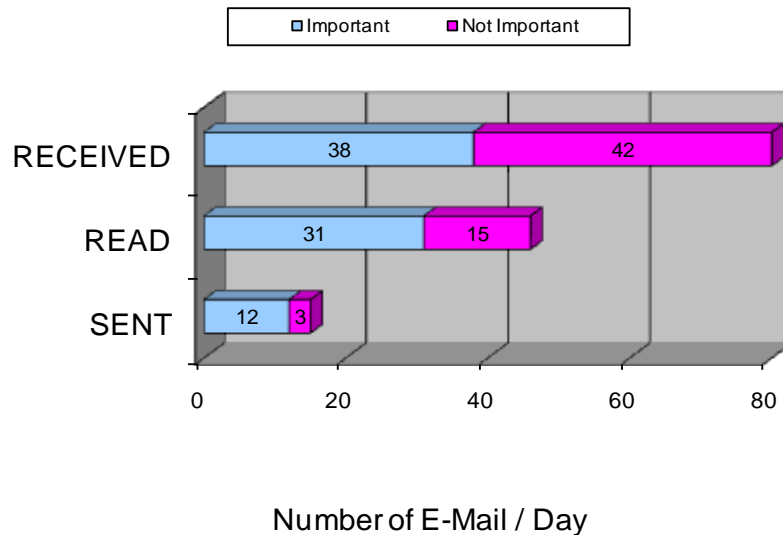


Figure 3.3 Findings: Sample Performance Level of a Busy Manager. Note the amount of unimportant e-mail being read and sent, at the cost of important business priorities. (Source: Messagemind, Inc.)

4. Conclusion

E-mail overload results in delaying time-to-action on important priorities. It has also led to an untapped wealth of knowledge, opportunities and relationships buried in collective mailboxes.

The question becomes – does an enterprise allow these issues to continue to impact competitiveness or does it take action to transform them to help increase profitability and company value?

E-mail is simultaneously the most used business application and (has been labeled) the number one ‘killer’ of productivity. The problem is only worsening as e-mail volume continues its relentless exponential growth. Unified communications, downsizing, globalization, collaboration, flat organizations, are examples of the changes in the way business is conducted that fuels this unending growth in volume. An increasing portion of a worker’s time is spent processing e-mail.

The impact of this e-mail ‘tsunami’ is an increasing cost to firms, as almost half of an employee’s work day is spent reading e-mail and approximately half of e-mail received is not considered important. Important e-mail are not being read or seriously delayed and unimportant e-mail are being read and acted upon.



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These direct costs of e-mail overload include but are not limited to diminished productivity, higher cost of bandwidth supporting mobile devices for unnecessary e-mail, and archiving unimportant e-mail. Indirect costs include longer “time to action”, “time to decision”, “time to market”, and “impaired relations” (with customers, vendors, shareholders, employees) are estimated to be a multiple of the direct losses. The cumulative effects of these losses are significant to an organization.

Unfortunately, technology and tools have not kept pace with this ‘tsunami’ of e-mail. Existing technology does not directly address e-mail overload and it is constrained by many limitations. Among these are static rules, complex and time-consuming changing of filters and folders and other significant user intervention. Moreover it may not fit work processes, may be desktop bound, slow, and lack measurement and reporting.

E-mail training on best practices, though helpful, does not overcome the sheer volume of e-mail and may require consistent ‘refreshing’.

The need is for technology like Messagemind that directly addresses e-mail volume in a simple, intuitive manner that mimics the way people work. Messagemind’s C-MAIL dynamic prioritization™ technology runs unobtrusively in the background, learns priorities and provides views that permit users to work on their most important e-mail on desktops and mobile devices.

Easy to use workflow buttons help users take action on their e-mail, and Dynamic Prioritization™ permits them to easily make changes as circumstances change.

Enterprises need a way to allow the individual to assess their own performance and/or performance in the context of the team, business unit or entire enterprise. Goals and policies can be set at individual, group or enterprise levels. A powerful dashboard of analytics and performance measurement is available with use of Messagemind.

Messagemind technology is a ‘game-changer’ in that it transforms e-mail overload from a costly problem to a competitive advantage.



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5. About Authors

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6. About Messagemind™

Messagemind (www.messagemind.com) provides a suite of easy-to-use intelligent software and services that are helping global enterprises and government customers leverage e-mail overload to increase productivity, accelerate innovation and enhance customer service.

Messagemind is the only company that offers complete e-mail productivity and business intelligence software including Dynamic Prioritization™, dynamic social network analysis, productivity analytics and reporting at all levels. Privacy and security controls are provided to meet stringent requirements of EU and other country-specific laws and company policies.

Should you wish to contact us to discuss this whitepaper or other related research topics, please contact us at corporate@messagemind.com or by phone at +1 212.234.4300.

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