

Controlling CC: Messages

By Christina A. Cavanagh

Are you suffering from a fat inbox? If you're like most workers, you have more messages to digest in a day than time allows. Research shows that overstuffed inboxes are now creating a sense of fatigue among North American workers, who are simply weary dealing with unnecessary messages. The problem is that some of these poor e-mail practices have become so ingrained in workplaces that they now appear quite acceptable.

Instinctively, we know that e-mail volumes are something to avoid and that we should try to tailor our own usage so that we don't clog co-worker inboxes. Yet, research results keep pointing to our suffering at the hands of the same time-wasting culprits. I have spoken with many companies who try to find universal solutions to email fatigue. Many gravitate to the all-nothing-all approach, such as e-mail free Fridays or designated hours each day where e-mail is not to be used, in the hopes that having nothing will make us appreciate having something.

These methods, while gaining in popularity, are short-lived because they only serve to interrupt busy work routines, not resolve specific email usage problems. So let's take a detailed look at what many consider to be the e-mail enemy number one – cc: messages.

When used improperly, cc:s are both inbox cloggers and time killers. The common method is adding names to an e-mail and sending the same message to all parties, regardless of their respective interests or involvement in the communicated situation. While this is the generally accepted use of cc: it is in no way its most efficient. It might appear expeditious for the sender to craft a single message to multiple parties, but should we expect all the receivers to react in the same manner? Likely not, but our practices seem to dictate a different understanding.

For instance, is use of cc: appropriate when an employee originates a message to an executive two levels their senior and also copies in their immediate supervisor? Should the executive assume that the message content was already cleared with the employee's supervisor? In many instances, the answer is no. Middle managers tell me that they bear the brunt of this mildly illicit practice, accepting having their position power humbled yet again at the hands of e-mail.

How does this occur? Well, cc: messages require even more advanced planning than a single party e-mail because of the number of people involved. We need to consider carefully not why, but how each recipient will treat this incoming communication. The reason we dislike cc: more than any other inbox perpetrator is because their rationale is hard to decode at a glance and therefore wastes valuable time.

The main problem with current use of cc: for recipients is trying to determine the consequence of the message. [Many have told me that they give up and don't read them at all.] There is a typical cycle of questions we ask ourselves, as follows: why am I

receiving this?, Do I need to be involved? Does receipt of this message constitute acceptance or ownership? Ironically, cc: messages sent without due regard or consideration of all recipients are the most unproductive items in our inbox repertoire. With such a daunting array of time-consuming possibilities, it's little wonder we approach these types of messages with trepidation. Our earlier example points to another cc: consideration – has this message been authorized or approved for release?

The basic misconception with using cc: is time. We think time is conserved when we use the function. It is by current standards of use, and only by the sender. Unfortunately, because we haven't taken the time to express openly and loudly our collective dissatisfaction with use of the cc: function, senders who are also our colleagues, are the last know and rarely if ever find out that their messages are ill-conceived.

In our role as e-mail receivers, we are too busy to do anything other than find a quick and logical reason to ignore or delete the message. Therefore, the cc: time-wasting cycle continues on unchecked. If only we were willing to talk about the problem we could make significant strides in reducing unnecessary volumes. For example, at an e-mail workshop an executive declared that he never reads his cc: messages, much to the surprise of his subordinates, who were also in attendance. A brief group discussion ensued where this fact was definitely confirmed. Two weeks later the executive reported back that his e-mail volumes dropped by 20 percent.

What are the motivations for cc: use? They are based usually on assumptions as to how electronic communication should flow and progress. Senders assume receivers will understand why they were copied in. Others think that taking extra time to add specific information or context for cc: parties are counterintuitive to the efficiency of electronic messaging. Those who are more politically savvy will use cc: to get approvals without direct request or discussion. And there are many people who simply don't know that they could or should do something different. Again, with so many opposing choices, it's no wonder that the meaning of these messages is so confounding.

Now that we see the causes, we can advance towards meaningful solutions at work. Suggestions for best use of cc: are:

Don't blind side colleagues with unexpected cc:s. Find out in which specific circumstances they need to be copied in on a message or want to be. Yes, it takes more effort, but once you get into the habit, it will save valuable time for you and your colleagues.

For cc:s that are fyi only, add a specific fyi line at the top of the message advising who needs to read versus take action, to help all receivers prioritize the message.

For cc:s that require differing actions on the part of recipients, forward the message with separate and distinct explanations.

For better inbox management, use the colour coding feature for incoming messages [in Outlook, under Options] and designate cc:'s a different colour from messages sent to you personally – you can then read them at a time that's convenient to you. You can also direct incoming cc: messages to a separate folder, so they don't even appear in your inbox.

Take the time to question the provenance of incoming cc: messages and help stamp out hierarchical abuse of this function. Don't assume they have all been sanctioned by your immediate subordinates

Lastly, we each have a responsibility to let our co-workers know our preferences for receiving cc: messages. If you never read them, then do yourself and them a time-saving favour by telling them.

Let's take a giant step towards stamping our inbox fatigue. Make cc: stand for "conscious and caring."

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