The Real Cost of E-mail Mismanagement
By Christina A. Cavanagh

With North American average daily volume of e-mail approaching sixty per day, so do our stress levels, and now we always feel the spectre of unfinished email business. There is that odd moment of anticipation punctuated by an e-mail from a much loved business associate or the promise of landing a new piece of business, but now these have become fewer and further between. Instead, most corporate e-mail inboxes are being clogged daily with low value, nice to know information that seems to be sent just because the mechanism exists to do so.

In a 2007 poll, managers and executives said only 48% of their workplace messages were considered essential and valuable to their businesses. This is down from 63% in a similar poll taken in 2005. When asked what their biggest problem with electronic messages is, 73% said they were too accessible to frivolous e-mails. This is up from 50% in 2005.

It's obvious that while we all use e-mail at work and non-span volumes are not increasing so significantly on average, its core purpose as a business communication tool is eroding. In the years I have researched and studied e-mail, I have drawn three major conclusions on its use in the workplace as follows:

Conclusions on E-mail Usage at Work

1. E-mail is not as productive as originally envisioned or intended.
2. The e-mail communication channel needs further definition and refinement in the workplace.
3. Overload has become a serious management issue.

What exactly does e-mail overload cost?

My book Managing Your E-mail: Thinking Outside the Inbox [Wiley 2003] states for an individual receiving 48 e-mails per day (the 2002 North American average), 0.93 hours per day is spent on low-value, unproductive e-mail management. Therefore unproductive e-mailing siphons 12% from corporate resources every year.

For people receiving 75 e-mails per day, the resource drain can be upwards of 25%, depending upon how individuals manage these excessively high loads. Using our more conservative 12% calculation, for every $10 Million of costs associated with employee payroll and benefits, $1.2 Million is being forfeited to unproductive use of the e-mail system every year.

On a qualitative basis, overuse of e-mail communication creates tension and stress amongst employees in the workplace on two dimensions:

♦ There is a loss of control as people feel powerless to stop the constant e-mail torrent
♦ There is a greater sense of isolation as human contact is significantly reduced due to over-reliance on e-mail to communicate

These aspects, while more difficult to numerically capture, are significant contributors to lower employee morale and reduced productivity.

We have yet to address the additional costs of storing e-mails. According to Open Text Corporation, e-mail storage is growing at an average rate of 30-35% annually, doubling every 2-3 years. 60% of organizations consider increasingly unmanageable backup and restore times as a very serious problem and 79% of organizations impose inbox quotas.

So as we easily see from the above, there is not only a business case for e-mail overload, there's also an imperative to improve on this situation and reduce email operating costs.

Perhaps we can't eradicate all e-mail waste at work, but I think you'd agree that 12% is a figure that can be dealt with. One large firm that undertook the e-mail challenge with their end users measured a *3% reduction in e-mail management time within 6 weeks*. This significant reduction came as a result of internal efforts and a modest budget. So we know instinctively that it is possible to proactively manage e-mail communication for the benefit of individual users and their organizations.

How much would your department, office or business gain if they could reduce e-mail overload costs from 12% to 6% in a year and like a diet, keep it off? What if this could be done without a battery of external consultants, a new business plan or reallocating already scarce resources? What if the real solution to gain back opportunities lost was as simple as relying on some individual training, management reinforcement and internal resources?

Managing Your E-mail: Online Tutorial is a unique, one of its kind tool, created by the author of *Managing Your E-mail: Thinking Outside the Inbox* Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. It is specially designed to create immediate impact, improving use of communication and organizational productivity on a direct and very accessible basis.

We can now see that it is possible to reduce e-mail overload and create sustainable productivity gains. It's a journey worth taking. Enjoy the course!