

Workplace E-mail Conservation: Worth the Effort?

By Christina A. Cavanagh

“We shape our tools and then our tools shape us,” wrote Marshall McLuhan in 1964, referring in part to the new technology of television. More than 40 years later, his observation just as easily applies to e-mail, another brilliant technology that has become so ubiquitous at the office that we’re forced to work at how not to use it.

Is e-mail productivity worth pursuing? Is a couple of thousand dollars saved for every \$100,000 paid out each year worth the effort? These days it is *de rigueur* to conserve energy and the environment – so why not workplace e-mail? We save kilowatts easily through switching to low energy light bulbs; we could do the same for e-mail by switching off low value messages. It doesn’t have to be a high cost proposition.

Xerox Canada decided to take the plunge April 2007 by launching their e-mail conservation campaign “Take Back the Hour” to its 4,200 employees. Sacha Fraser, senior counsel and able leader of this initiative said “I knew e-mail was being abused and misused. So did my colleagues and business associates. The opportunity to prove that e-mail could be used productively in an organization was an exciting concept, especially as there seemed to be no examples of proven or attempted success within the business community.”

In the first six weeks of the initiative, 62% of employees reported a measurable drop in e-mail volumes, with average time spent on e-mail reduced by 13 minutes per day, a little over an hour per week. One employee posted “I’m very happy with the reduced number and better quality of e-mail. I also appreciate that people are respecting business hours. I have not received any e-mails in the last two weekends. On a personal level – Thank you!”

The company didn’t use external paid consultants to achieve the result. It was an in-house project on a minimal budget. The key to success was admitting they had a problem with e-mail and committing to creating a solution. Here is a glimpse of what they did.

A business case was presented to senior management to sponsor a cross functional team that would in six months create an e-mail model through a top-down effort supplemented by employee awareness and training.

Facts were gathered via Xerox’s e-mail system to determine actual volumes, times when e-mails were sent, files sizes and through a targeted employee survey. Their e-mail pet peeves are: over-inclusiveness, distribution list misuse, perpetual connectivity, lack of direction from the sender, and not using a better medium for communication.

The team’s conclusions: The Company could save an hour a day per employee by cutting message volumes in half from an average 50-60 per day average per employee, by reducing message complexity and by improving message quality.

Custom solutions were then developed. The overarching strategy here was finding more e-mail pull than push options. These included technology tips, a communication campaign and a 7-minute training video which will also be offered to all new hires as part of their orientation.

Results were measured and tabulated by the team. The communication plan involved creating an intranet site to house the training and tips information, also acting as a touchstone and place for ongoing employee feedback and progress reports.

The key element was senior leadership support. Without it Xerox Canada's success would have been limited to small breakthroughs with individual users, rather than fostering more permanent changes in organizational behaviour. Senior managers were asked to monitor their e-mail habits as a sign of good faith. They were also asked to be proactive in lending their support at departmental levels and in encouraging individual employees to participate. Yes – participate.

This initiative was not mandated; employees were invited to take part. It's a critical point. If meaningful change is to stick it has to be compelling for both the individual and the organization. E-mail management may be centred on a technology but it is also viewed as a personal right. A heavy-handed approach would only create ill will and resistance. With careful and delicate consideration in this area, success becomes the inevitable by-product.

What Xerox's experience shows is the road to more productive e-mail management is not a revolution but rather an evolution, a long-term learning journey designed to make better e-mail citizens of all of us. Marshall McLuhan would be pleased.