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Tribune Internet critic

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Considering how much time we spend with it, it is astonishing how little thought we give to e-mail.

We might pause to chuckle at the latest pleadings from the inexhaustible ranks of deposed royalty or to cringe at the things Cousin Jed insists on sending to our work e-mail.

But in terms of the time we devote to day-to-day e-mail expertise -- crafting it, managing it, we might as well be communicating in Old West Norse.

We all develop coping mechanisms. But they amount to the kind of treading water that sees a wave swamp us every day or two. Inevitably, we forget to respond to our boss, send a note to colleagues that we mean as jaunty and they interpret as haughty, or commit to this permanent, quasi-public record our strategy for firing politically unfriendly U.S. attorneys.

Or we delete an important e-mail by accident while trying to clear out spam, as I actually did with a message setting up an interview time for this article.

"It's sort of like you find yourself in a car going 60 miles an hour down the highway, yet you've never been taught how to drive," says Will Schwalbe. "Even though we all e-mail, a lot of us are not always aware of the consequences of doing it badly or well."

Schwalbe, as editor in chief of Hyperion Books in New York, handles a lot of e-mails, sending and receiving some 40,000 or 50,000 a year, he has estimated. At lunch a couple of years ago with pal David Shipley, Op-Ed page editor of The New York Times, they were sharing grievances and they realized that "the majority of our complaints had to do with the annoying things people had done with e-mail or stupid things we had done."

And so was born "Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home," a new book (Knopf, \$19.95) for which authors Schwalbe and Shipley, as they were working on it, naturally used e-mail to put off an editor wondering when he would see a draft.

Another new book, Mark Hurst's "Bit Literacy," takes the concept of e-mail proficiency one step further. It's got a chapter emphasizing the importance of cleaning out your inbox every day, with tips on how to do it. (Hint: Don't use it as a Swiss army knife of computer tools, holding bookmarks, appointments and a corkscrew.)

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"E-mail has taken on supreme importance in the workplace because it's more effective than the telephone, which had been the most important tool," says Hurst, a principal in the New York consulting firm Creative Good. "One, every communication is documented and, two, it's asynchronous: You can talk to someone even if they're not available. Not to mention no long-distance charges. ...

"That helps explain the meteoric rise of this as a technology. E-mail is here, it's going to stay and people need a strategy for dealing with it."

A new phenomenon

His book offers that, but the bigger point of "Bit Literacy" is Hurst's evangelical belief that e-mail is part of a new, digital-era phenomenon, the streams of data, or "bits," also including photos and data files, that can overwhelm us if we don't aggressively manage them.

"The basic theory in e-mail and all other bitstreams is: To surmount the problem of information overload one has to let the bits go," Hurst says. "It does not mean that everyone should just turn off e-mail. What it means, rather, is that people need to get in the habit of looking for ways to delete, defer, delay or otherwise avoid bits because we're effectively in an age now where bits are infinite."

Although it has a June publication date, you can get the book through Amazon now or read the first chapter free at the "Bit Literacy" site (bitliteracy.com), where you can also find the glowing blurbs he's collected from the likes of Craig Newmark (craigslist.org) and info-age author Douglas Rushkoff. And his article on "Managing Incoming E-mail," a group of bits that coalesce as a .pdf file and the basis for the e-mail chapter, is available at Hurst's Good Experience site (goodexperience.com).

"'Bit Literacy' says bits are heavy, actually, and an infinite number of them has infinite weight, and it crushes people, their productivity, their morale," Hurst says.

"Having 3,000 e-mails in your inbox is unsustainable because that's 3,000 things asking for your attention. There's no way to prioritize. I don't see that there's any possible solution but that people should learn to achieve emptiness. In e-mail, people should try to get their inbox message count to zero once every day," Hurst says.

In Will Schwalbe's inbox, he says, there are a very manageable 17 items, if you don't count the 250 he has flagged for future action. "That's everything that I can't just kill in 10 seconds," he says. "I'll let it get to 250 then decide 'answer' or 'delete.'"

One of "Send's" coping tips: Click on the "from" field in Outlook to resort by sender. "Consistently when I'm just overwhelmed and want to weep," Schwalbe says, "I remember to do it and realize that most of the e-mails are a couple of people."

He'll respond by saying, "Looks like we've got a number of outstanding issues. Can we get on the phone and talk them through?"

Among the things his book is evangelical about is the importance of the thorough e-mail. Don't just type, "Want to meet for lunch?" Type, "How about lunch Thursday, 12:30 at Billy's?" You're on the way to cutting the number of messages back-and-forth in half, or better.

Don't use an e-mail when the telephone is better, especially for achieving compromise or a deal or broaching a sensitive topic. E-mail, he says, is terrible at tone, and for that reason, "Send" is actually in favor of emoticons.

Time is of the essence

"We all have a limited number of hours in a day, and in a perfect world we would compose e-mails where the English is so eloquent we didn't have to rely on them," says Schwalbe, who will be at the Book Stall in Winnetka (847-446-8880) at 7 p.m. on May 1 to talk about "Send."

He tells the story of one colleague who spent a day incensed because his boss had e-mailed him, "It's your project. Do whatever you want." The colleague interpreted this as dismissive, and it wasn't until after a full day of complaining that he finally confronted his boss, who explained that she really meant, " 'No, no, no. I really trust you. Whatever you think is fine,' " Schwalbe relates.

"People constantly forget that it's toneless, and people project tone onto it," he says. "Because it's writing, I think everyone assumed that all the rules would be the same, but in fact they're not."

He advocates using the phrase "no reply necessary" to cut off "the e-mail that won't go away," the one for which the subject line eventually starts "Re: Re: Re: Re:" etc.

Other tips: Don't be overly formal or overly familiar; use the signature function so that your e-mail correspondents have all your relevant contact information at hand; and write a subject line that's detailed, with specific words early in the phrase to help the many users of BlackBerrys and other portable devices with small screens.

But perhaps the most important advice for someone feeling frustrated by their inbox derives from the Golden Rule: "The best way to impact the e-mails you get," Schwalbe says, "is to send better e-mails."

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8 reasons you may not want to e-mail

1 The ease of e-mail encourages unnecessary exchanges.

Rule: If you wouldn't stop by a colleague's office every 10 minutes for a chat, you probably don't want to e-mail him frivolously 30 times a day.

2 E-mail has largely replaced the phone call, but not every phone call should be replaced.

Rule: Conveying an emotion, handling a delicate situation, testing the waters -- all these challenges are usually better undertaken with the human voice.

3 You can reach everyone, but everyone can reach you.

Rule: When it comes to outgoing messages, don't assume instant familiarity. And when it comes to incoming ones, try filters.

4 The fact that e-mail defies time zones also means that it can defy propriety.

Rule: Don't forget that every e-mail is an interruption. If the matter isn't urgent, a letter can be less intrusive.

5 The fact that e-mail always provides a searchable record means that you can be held accountable for your electronic correspondence [and important information can be hidden in seemingly innocuous e-mails].

Rule: If you're working with weasels, watch their e-mails like a hawk.

6 The ease with which an e-mail can be forwarded poses a danger.

Rule: Never forward anything without permission, and assume everything you write will be forwarded.

7 With e-mail, your words can be changed.

Rule: If you need to send a sensitive document via e-mail, one where it's essential that your words not be messed with, send your message in a PDF or some other hard-to-alter attachment.

8 E-mail attachments don't just come with baggage -- they are baggage.

Rule: [Sometimes attachments are necessary, as in No. 7, but] before you send an e-mail laden with attachments, keep in mind the following: pack carefully and travel light.

Source: "Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home"

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Recent victims of e-mail blunders

Julie Roehm

The former Wal-Mart executive sued the company for wrongful termination after her December firing. Wal-Mart countersued, producing romantic e-mails allegedly between her and an employee she supervised. They included suggestions of explicit sexual and emotional connections and, from Roehm to the colleague, this remarkable emoticon: ":)))))." Other e-mails appeared to back Wal-Mart's allegation that Roehm steered the company's huge advertising account to a firm in a less-than-impartial manner. Roehm says the messages have been taken out of context.

E-mail lesson: Too obvious to bother putting into words.

Justen Deal

The 22-year-old employee of the Kaiser Permanente HMO was fired from his \$56,000-a-year job after sending an e-mail to the entire company, blasting CEO George Halvorson and a new records-management system the CEO had authorized. Kaiser disputed Deal's charges. On the other hand, the dispute landed him on the front page of the Wall Street Journal this week, and he has been celebrated by bloggers almost from the minute he hit "send" on that first e-mail.

E-mail lesson: If you're going to lose your job over an e-mail, make it a doozy.

Kyle Sampson. The chief of staff to Atty. Gen. Alberto Gonzales resigned in March after his e-mails outlining plans for removing U.S. attorneys were made public. A March 2005 e-mail ranked all 93 U.S. attorneys as "Bold = Recommend retaining," "Strikeout = Recommend removing," and "Nothing = No recommendation." That his criteria included "loyalty to the president" has made it difficult for the administration to back its claim that the firings weren't politically motivated. E-mail lesson: Don't commit to e-mail any thought you wouldn't want to see on the front of the Washington Post. This is especially true when your line of work means your e-mails are public record.

Sgt. Marcia Ramode. The Army recruiter was moved to write e-mails that included phrases like this: "Personally I think being gay is disgusting and immoral." This happened when a potential recruit she contacted via e-mail replied that he was gay. In addition to bashing homosexuals, her side of the exchange also included racist rants and many typos. The Army reassigned her and is investigating. E-mail lesson(s): Keep your personal feelings out

of it, especially if they are vile. Cold-calling via e-mail is probably not the best strategy. And use spellcheck.

Conrad Black. The former head to the Sun-Times parent company, on trial for allegedly defrauding shareholders, was perhaps too frank for his own good in some e-mails. In one that prosecutors produced last week, he wrote, on the question of separating personal and corporate expenses, "As I have said before, a degree of accommodation with contemporary norms is what we need."

And of his top deputy, David Radler, also on trial, a Black e-mail including this: "David has always put out of mind the implications of being a public company." E-mail lesson: If you're going to go down, at least make sure your prose is as stellar as Black's.

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Five bad uses for e-mail inboxes

To-do list: Users often keep action items in the inbox. They're hard to find and easy to forget.

Filing system: Meeting notes, project status messages, attachments containing proposals, and other important documents often sit in the inbox, instead of going to a proper project folder.

Calendar: Dates and times for meetings, conference calls, and other appointments pile up in the inbox, often sticking around long after the appointment has passed.

Bookmarks list: Some e-mails remain in the inbox because they contain Web addresses, or user names and passwords for Web site logins, that the user isn't sure where to store.

Address book: Messages containing phone numbers and postal addresses of contacts sit in the inbox instead of being entered into an actual address book.

Source: "Bit Literacy," Mark Hurst

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Don't lose your cool

"The speed of e-mail doesn't just make it easier to lose our cool -- it actually eggs us on. On e-mail, people aren't quite themselves; they are angrier, less sympathetic, less aware, more easily wounded, even more gossipy and duplicitous. E-mail has a tendency to encourage the lesser angels of our nature.

"There's a reason for this. In a face-to-face (or voice-to-voice) conversation, our emotional brains are constantly monitoring the reactions of the person to whom we're speaking. ... E-mail by contrast, doesn't provide a speedy real-time channel for feedback. Yet the technology somehow lulls us into thinking that such a channel exists."

"The fact that e-mail is a searchable, storable medium means that you have to compose your message with special care. And the fact that you are writing -- constructing sentences, choosing words, making grammatical decisions, adding punctuation -- with previously unimaginable swiftness makes the situation all the more vexed, as does the delusion that e-mail, because it's electronic, is somehow more ephemeral than, say, a letter.

"Also, because it's often acceptable to be lax about the rules of grammar on e-mail, there's the misconception that it's always acceptable to be lax about them. That's not the case."

-- From "Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home"

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