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Help! I'm Drowning in E-Mail!

Many Users Give Up Hope, But Some Devise Tricks That Keep Them Afloat

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Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

DO YOU WORK through your e-mail box from top to bottom, or bottom to top?

Do you set aside messages that take more than 10 seconds of thought? Do you remember to get back to them?

Is the number of messages in your inbox DRIVING YOU CRAZY?

For a growing number of people, keeping up with e-mail is a battle they can't seem to win. In 2001, an estimated 1.4 trillion messages—trillion—were sent from businesses alone in North America, up from 40 billion in 1995, according to research firm International Data Corp.

E-mail has become a main way of communicating between supervisors and employees, between companies and customers and among colleagues, family and friends. One research firm estimates the average office worker spends 49 minutes a day on e-mail, while another puts that number at about four hours a day for top management.

To keep up, many people find themselves answering work e-mail at home and personal e-mail at work. And with the explosion of wireless e-mail devices, e-mail often replaces face-to-face meetings for busy executives as well as chatty teenagers.

Sept. 11 and the anthrax scares showed how important e-mail can be when regular communication fails. America Online spokesman Nicholas Graham calls Sept. 11 and what followed a "seminal event" in the online world. During its busiest day, Sept. 25, AOL reported 280 million messages sent over its service—an 86% increase from its peak day the previous September.

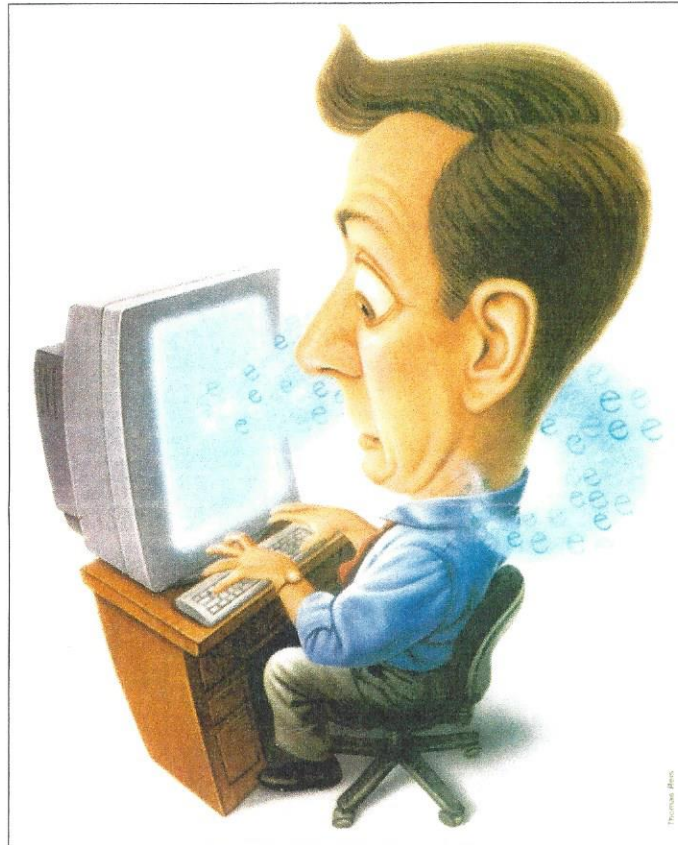
The load raises some thorny time-management quandries: Is it best to stop work and answer mail as it arrives, or wait until you get a break? How many "cc's" are too many? Is using abbreviations such as "y" for "yes" smart, or bad manners?

Experts say keeping e-mail under control requires a careful balance of common sense, organizational skills and vigilant workplace policy. Employers increasingly are realizing that strict rules for deleting e-mail not only

Wall Street Journal Online

See additional profiles of e-mail warriors, and some tips on coping with your own flood of digital correspondence.

Question of the Day: How much time do you spend a day responding to e-mail?
WSJ.com/JournalLinks



help employees manage more efficiently but also offer legal protection, says Nancy Flynn, executive director of the Columbus, Ohio-based ePolicy Institute, a consulting firm that trains businesses how to use e-mail, software and the Internet more effectively.

"There are so many cases like the Microsoft trial where e-mail is the smoking gun and has done damage to the employer," Ms. Flynn says. "In case of a lawsuit, employers would ask for all messages in employees' active inboxes."

There are several ways employers can keep workplace e-mail more manageable. One is to install software that automatically deletes messages every 30 days or so and filters for "spam," as junk e-mail is called, as well as

blocks certain attachments, Ms. Flynn says. Employers also should have a policy on e-mail use—how much personal use is permitted, for example—and explain the penalties for violating it. There also should be parameters on the number of e-mail lists such as discussion groups for which employees can sign up.

Still, managing e-mail remains, in many ways, a personal responsibility—and most everyone has his or her own tricks. Here's how some professionals are coping with their own blizzard ... or not:

The Minimizer: Anne Zehren, age 39, publisher of Teen People magazine, New York
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Some Devise Tricks to Keep From Drowning in E-Mail

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New Messages per Day: 60-80

Survival Tactics: To keep up with her burgeoning inbox, Ms. Zehren set up basic guidelines to control the quality and quantity of messages pouring in from office colleagues. The rules, which don't apply to messages from teenage readers, help keep her inbox relatively tidy:



Anne Zehren

—If it's more than two sentences, it should be a conversation, not e-mail.

—No scheduling of meetings via e-mail.

—Don't send e-mail if you're sitting next door.

—Just because you copied someone in on an e-mail, it doesn't mean your "you-know-what" is covered.

Through trial and error, magazine co-workers have learned the system and now her computer mainly serves as a research and scheduling tool. Ms. Zehren also doesn't feel guilty trashing unread messages if senders don't follow her instructions. A one-time experiment using the "out of office" reply tool proved that her rules work. "I told everyone not to e-mail me unless it was urgent. I got back and there were 300 messages and I mass-deleted them all. Nothing bad happened. ... it proved nothing was urgent."

Ms. Zehren also uses a Motorola two-way e-mail pager to keep up with the young entertainment artists who fill her magazine's colorful pages. "It's so easy to carry around and we can message back and forth. People in the music industry all communicate like that. ... It's sort of like a fashion statement," she says.

The Editor: Marco Scibora, 48, chief executive of Advanced Communication Design Inc., Minneapolis

New Messages per Day: 50-60

Survival Tactics: As the busy head of a small technology company, Mr. Scibora says that short, simple messages are the best way to keep his inbox under control. After a morning cup of coffee, he scans his new messages with the efficient eye of an editor looking for the crux of the story. "For me, time is of essence. Keep it short, official and to-the-point," Mr. Scibora says.



Marco Scibora

If he doesn't get the information he needs out of the first three sentences of an e-mail, he moves on, relegating those wordy messages for later. And he has little tolerance for smiley faces, acronyms and sloppy phrases. Mr. Scibora tries to remember his efficient approach when he copies others in on messages. "If you're carbon-copying people for future reference, you shouldn't do it because that fu-

ture reference never comes," he advises. To keep up with his inbox, Mr. Scibora has what he calls "weekend catch-up" where he responds to messages he didn't get to during the week. "I'm guilty of not responding for two to three days sometimes," he says. While many CEOs use assistants to manage their mailboxes, Mr. Scibora says he wouldn't let anyone else answer business e-mail on his behalf. "There's a certain level of judgment that goes along with e-mail," he says. "Someone else might not know how I'd pursue things."

The Sorter: Terri Towery, 46, deputy public defender, Los Angeles

New Messages per Day: 100-150

Survival Tactics: Right after consulting her daily calendar in the morning, Ms. Towery sits down to tackle her inbox. It usually takes 20 minutes to an hour to sort through the 70-80 messages waiting for her. While half are brief case updates, or memos from other lawyers in her field, many are newsletters or circuit court case summaries commanding several pages of space.



Terri Towery

Ms. Towery, who usually reads every e-mail before she goes home for the evening, says sorting the jumble of new messages by category helps her manage the load efficiently. "I create a new box and divert all those listserve e-mails [those from discussion or special-interest groups] into it. I'll maybe have 100 messages in one box, and then I sort by the type of case it is." This sorting, along with periodic deleting, keeps Ms. Towery's total e-mail count to fewer than 10 new messages at a time.

Ms. Towery says she spends about two hours of her workday on e-mail, but it's time well-spent. "E-mail makes being a lawyer much easier," Ms. Towery says. "I can do twice as much work as before."

The E-Addict: Tom Julian, 39, trend analyst at Fallon Worldwide, New York

New Messages per Day: More than 100

Survival Tactics: In a business where styles, stars and sales change by the minute, Mr. Julian is in a virtual rut. The self-described "e-connected individual" says he can't remember what life was like not being on the computer all hours of the day. "I've started the worst habit getting on the computer at five o'clock in the morning," he said. "Before I know it, it's 6:30, and I've lost an hour that should be for me."



Tom Julian

On Sept. 11, the routine ended up being a blessing in disguise. Mr. Julian, who lives near the World Trade Center, compulsively decided to check his e-mail one last

time before stepping out at 8:35 a.m. The delay proved invaluable when, minutes later, a plane hit the North Tower. He used his high-speed line to e-mail friends and family until the South Tower collapsed and he lost phone service. Once he reached a safe location in New Jersey, he accessed his work e-mail account to correspond with worried business contacts and family. Still, Mr. Julian says the innate value of e-mail doesn't take away the guilt he feels if he doesn't respond to all of his messages. He never deletes an e-mail without reading it and estimates he saves 50% of his messages for future reference. He also prints out any industry-related e-mail he can't digest on screen. Overall, Mr. Julian says he's happy about how productive he's become with e-mail, but frustrated by how tied down he feels to the inbox. "I'm more procedural, more contained and a little less flexible," he says.

The Prioritizer: Maury Rogoff, 45, president of Maury Rogoff Public Relations, New York

New Messages per Day: 100

Survival Tactics: Just before Ms. Rogoff takes off her heels after a long day at work, the busy public-relations executive makes a beeline to her home office and starts pounding out e-mail. "When I'm home, I still answer e-mail. After Letterman, I'm still starting e-mail ... I respond to every e-mail," she says proudly. Although she insists she's not an "e-mail addict," Ms. Rogoff calls in regularly to have her assistant read her messages when she's out of the office and gets a jump-start on e-mail before she leaves for work in the morning.



Maury Rogoff

And despite the lure of portable devices like a BlackBerry or a e-mail pager, Ms. Rogoff says she's resisting becoming connected around the clock. "I want to be human," she laughs. Her coping tactics: E-mail is answered in the order it scrolls onto her screen, and it's trashed just as fast. Ms. Rogoff doesn't keep e-mail folders, and rarely prints out messages. Callers often hear the click-click of her nails on the keyboard as she answers e-mail and conducts phone conversations simultaneously.

Personal e-mail is a no-no in Ms. Rogoff's small office of six employees. Recently, she took away e-mail privileges for a short period of time after catching her employees e-mailing friends. "You don't mess with personal stuff on someone else's dime," she warns. "It's about business."

The Mobile Multitasker: Patrick Egan, 30, president of Egan Consulting, Toronto

New Messages per Day: 50-100

Survival Tactics: Mr. Egan's day begins at 6:30 with an alarm. But the beep doesn't emanate from a clock, it comes from his BlackBerry, a mobile e-mail device made by Research In Motion Ltd. Once he turns the BlackBerry on, the e-mail he missed

overnight start scrolling onto the unit's tiny screen. By the time he arrives at work, Mr. Egan has responded to high-priority e-mail and whittled down his inbox to about 10 messages. The BlackBerry, which clips onto his belt, "pretty much rendered my laptop useless" for e-mail purposes, Mr. Egan says.



Patrick Egan

The device also filters all his e-mail to a password-protected Web site and allows him to read his new messages from his BlackBerry, work and Internet accounts anywhere he goes. That comes in handy since the majority of his day is spent on the road at sales and consulting meetings. Despite his mobile lifestyle, Mr. Egan says he spends only an hour on e-mail each day. "I'm not compulsive about answering e-mail right away. It's at my convenience," he says.

The Simplifier: Colleen Walsh, 18, high school senior, Culver Academies, Culver, Ind.

New Messages per Day: 20-30

Survival Skills: In the four years Ms. Walsh has attended her private boarding school, e-mail has gone from a fun lunch-time diversion to a school-day staple. During her freshman year, Ms. Walsh checked her inbox once a day and did her schoolwork with pen and paper.

These days, most all essays, exams and homework are done via e-mail with a school-issued laptop. "This year my e-mail load has doubled, if not tripled, because teachers are using it a lot more," Ms. Walsh says. To keep up with campus social life, Ms. Walsh scrolls through club announcements, dorm news and extracurricular events on her school e-mail account. And while some of her friends use the school's e-mail network as an instant-messaging system in the dorm, she rarely e-mails friends on campus. "I can talk to them in person or down the hall," she says.



Colleen Walsh

Ms. Walsh keeps her inbox clean with a simple philosophy: "I type it out quickly, I get the message across and I rarely bother to proofread." That rule doesn't apply to schoolwork, which is filed in more than eight e-mail folders labeled by class subject. This fall and spring, she'll be monitoring e-mail more closely as she nervously awaits updates from 10 colleges she applied to for next year. She doesn't think she'll get final decisions on e-mail, though. "Most all schools let you know ... by the old-fashioned acceptance letter," she says.

Journal Link: How much time do you spend a day responding to e-mail? Visit WSJ.com/Journal-Links to vote, and see some additional profiles of e-mail warriors and how they cope.



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