The e-mail Epidemic by Dr. Bob Kriegel

The pressures on project managers today are enormous. To keep ahead of the incredibly rapid changes that are occurring in every area and to get an edge on the competition, everybody is working faster, longer and harder and trying to do more with less or, as one manager told me, do more with nothing.

One solution for streamlining your work, saving a great deal of time and providing more value for your organization is literally right in front of your eyes. In fact, you get hit with it every time you open your computer… if you ever have it closed.

It's e-mail, the wondrous piece of technology that promised to help us communicate more effectively, work more efficiently and cut down our work load. E-mail, however, has turned out to be like some wonder drug that promised dramatic results, but because of overdosing has begun to cause what if promised to cure. "People are using it for everything," one manager told me. "It's like an epidemic that's gotten out of control."

A recent survey I did with over a hundred companies found that most people are spending at least an hour and a half a day on email. But here's the kicker; the next question was: what percentage of those emails were really valuable, helping you to move forward, take the ball down the field? Take a minute and answer that question for yourself.

The average for these companies was -- are you ready for this -- 12%! But let's say it was even 33%, or that 1/3 of your emails were important. Even that would mean that of that hour and a half, you were wasting 60 minutes. Imagine what you could do with an extra hour at work, or at home or ….

Many of the companies that I have worked with have developed rules for email to cut down on this waste of time and effort. Here are some of them. The key is not necessarily to use theirs, but to make up your own.

Eliminate the 'reply to all' button

One manager told me of an e-mail horror story (everyone seemed to have one) about how e-mail had become self-perpetuating in their company. "It used to be that we'd have a meeting in which someone would put forth a recommendation and everyone would give feedback.

"Now the recommendation is e-mailed and everyone receiving it sends their responses, but not only to the sender to everyone on the list. So now e-mails are buzzing back and forth to and from everyone involved in the decision and of course everyone else that they have asked for an opinion. The result is that we're besieged by an epidemic of e-mails. And with all that, what are the chances a decision ever gets implemented? Zilch! "Please," she continued, "I never thought I'd ask for this, but how about a short meeting?"

To counter this overuse tendency, several companies went so far as to eliminate the 'reply to all' button on their software.

Routing List from Hell

Did you ever get one of those e-mails in which you are one of about hundred names on a routing list that is three times as long as the message? The story behind that is usually

someone who wants to ensure that he either gets credit for his idea, covers his butt or lets everyone know that he is still alive and doing something

My suggestion: if your name is somewhere down on the cc list it means one thing -- that email isn't to you! So delete it! Or put it into a folder to be read later.

"I never read anything that is not sent directly to me," the general manager of a large manufacturing plant told me. "I can't afford to. I don't have the time. Whenever I see that I am on the routing list, I know it's not something that is important so I immediately delete it. I figure that if it is important for me to read, they'll send it to me directly."

Many companies actually now ban routing lists. Brian Fugerre, the director of marketing and a partner at Deloitte Consulting, made his staff of over a hundred take a pledge to eliminate non discriminate sending of emails including 'reply to all' responses and 'copy universe' memos.

No more triple plays

Then there are those people that send you an email and then leave a voice mail to ensure that you have received the e-mail. And to make triply sure you have received the message they send you a hard copy. Why not simply ask for a response to the e-mail and forget the voice mail and paper?

"Never thought of that" one manager told me. That's precisely the problem. We get a new tool that has terrific potential, but when we're in a hurry, who has time to think about how to use it? So we abuse it.

Jokes-- it's not so funny

And how about all those jokes that get e-mailed? Don't get me wrong. I love to laugh and have fun. I also think that we need more laughter and fun in the workplace. Problem is that most of the jokes aren't that funny. And then we send them to someone, who sends it so someone else, who then unknowingly sends it to us which is not funny at all.

The CIO of a Fortune 100 company told me that they figured the cost of people's time reading jokes, estimating 18 seconds for opening, reading and closing a joke, was $12 million!

So save the jokes for the water cooler.

Thank You Notes

Some people feel that they should respond when they get an e-mail. So they send you back something like ''thanks for the report' which of course leaves you confused because you aren't sure what that refers to and trying to figure it out takes more time and energy. Sure it may be polite and your parents told you to always respond and send thank you notes. But even a short response and thanks takes a couple of minutes.

Some e-mails obviously need a response but many are just information and don't. So take a risk and don't respond. Your mother may not approve, but she's not on the other end anyway. Focus on efficiency, not politeness.

Making it More Meaningful

Shelly Lazarus, the chair and CEO of advertising giant Ogilvy and Mather thinks e-mail is important but, "There's no substitute for face to face. Something happens when you are in the room with people with whom you work, trying to solve a problem together or just listening to them. And the e-mail becomes more meaningful after the trip with the face to face."

One of my rules is: don't send an e-mail if your proposed recipient is in an office near by. Walk over to their office and give them the information. As Ms. Lazarus says, there's no substitute for face to face communication.

Sorting… Sort of

John Wanamaker, one of America's pioneering retailers, once remarked about advertising something that is equally true about email: "I know half of it doesn't work. The problem is that I don't know which half."

One way to solve that problem is that many companies are beginning to use the e-mail subject box to identify different categories. One hi-tech organization uses numbers from 1-5 to delineate the level of urgency, with 5 being the most important. Another uses different color flags with red the most urgent.
Another way is to use a code in the subject slot that would identify the type of e-mail it is. An example could be
FYI-- for your information.
RAL-- read at your leisure
URGNT-- read at once
NRN-- no response necessary
RR -- reply requested
FYI/CMB for your information, covering my butt
HAHA-- joke

Whatever you do, do something to stop the e-mail epidemic in your organization. Make the best use of this potentially very efficient, effective tool by learning to use, not abuse, nor be used by it. You will save an incredible amount of time and headaches. And that might just give you some time to think about how to get your projects completed on time, within budget and to the highest standards of quality and customer satisfaction!

New York Times best-selling author Dr. Bob Kriegel's books are: *If it ain't broke... BREAK IT!*, *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers* (Business Week best seller list) and his latest, *How to Succeed in Business Without Working so Damn Hard*. Kriegel is one of the most highly sought after business speakers.