Improving E-mail - Avoid the Quicksand

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Sometimes e-mail feels like steroids for communication; other times it feels more like quicksand. A key problem is trying to figure out which notes among the hundreds received each day must be opened and read. This article describes an idea that will accelerate the flow of notes through your inbox and other tips to make your e-mail sparkle. It will help you write notes that people actually read.

One of my students relayed a method used by a Major General in the Air Force to help organize the inbox clutter. The idea is to establish a kind of code that goes upfront on the subject line of all e-mails within a unit. No, I am not talking about the famous military acronyms. These code words are so simple that everyone knows what they mean. Here are the prefaces the senior officer required on each note in his unit:

ACTION:

INFORM:

REQUEST:

QUESTION:

COORDINATE:

RESPOND:

If an entire unit took up this convention, it would be possible to set up files for the incoming e-mails to go directly to one of the above categories and not sit in the main inbox of notes. This would allow an individual to go directly to the ACTION folder if time was short, or browse the INFORM folder when a more leisurely pace was possible. It would still be possible to mark certain notes as "urgent" so that method of giving priority is still available as well. One caution on the use of "urgent" is to not abuse the designation. When an individual uses "urgent" as a means to give routine requests higher priority, it defeats the purpose and labels the abuser as a poor online communicator.

Another tip for the subject line is to actually compress the entire e-mail message onto the subject, then type EOM (End Of Message) at the end. The subject would look like this: "Meeting for Tuesday at 10 am cancelled: EOM" This saves readers the time to open the note, and they still get the essential information. Clearly not all e-mail messages can fit into a subject line, but if 10% of them actually could, why not use this time-saving technique?

There are many methods of managing the inbox for optimal efficiency. It is a matter of personal choice what works for you. One habit that works for me is to try to get the inbox down to zero notes at least once a day. I am not always successful at getting to zero, but roughly half of my days I can see an empty inbox.

I rarely let the inbox get to more than one page long, so all of the notes waiting for my attention can be viewed in one frame. That practice gives me the ability to have very rapid turnaround time on all incoming requests. It is a good way of building higher trust online. I receive over 150 notes on an average day, so having an uncluttered inbox saves a lot of search time.

When writing notes, make most of them short enough to fit entirely on one display pane. The reason is psychological. When the reader opens the note, he or she will see at a glance that the note ends right there in the first pane, because the signature block will be visible at the bottom of the screen. That puts the reader in a happy place regarding how much time will be required to read the note. This realization will go a long way toward having the reader pay attention and absorb the meaning.

If a note goes beyond the first pane (I call it "over the horizon"), then the reader is in a more grumpy mood while diving into the content. Psychologically, he or she is distracted by wondering how long the note really is and pays less attention to the content. The person may not even tackle the note and put it back in the inbox to read later, if at all.

These tips are easy to accomplish, if people are trained to use them and the expectation is made clear. Your work environment will be significantly more efficient and you will stay out of e-mail quicksand if you use these ideas every day and teach them to others.

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