

## Take Control Of E-mail

by Jack E. Appleman, CBC



If you don't waste time on e-mail communication, then you're in the minority. Today, the average employee spends the equivalent of 75 days a year on e-mail, a third of which is wasted time, according to *The Hamster Revolution* (by Song, Halsey & Burrell, (2008, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.). Can you imagine how much productivity you could lose as a result?

It doesn't have to be that way. The best practices below can help you efficiently manage e-mail communication.

### Reduce The Number Of E-Mails

For every five e-mails you send, you get back three in return, according to *The Hamster Revolution*. So by eliminating one of five outgoing e-mails, you would receive 12 percent fewer e-mails. These strategies can help reduce the number of outgoing and incoming e-mails:

#### Limit Reply All/CC

How many e-mails do you get every week that you could care less about? Let's say the purchasing manager

e-mails 15 people, including you, asking what office furniture you need. Then each person responds with the *Reply All* key, filling your in box with messages such as, "I could use three desk lamps, two executive chairs, and...." What do you care what furniture the people upstairs need? To avoid wasting readers' time, the purchasing manager should specify to "Reply to me only."

#### Don't thank everything

No, I'm not suggesting you lose your manners. But not every e-mail needs a thank you. For example, a colleague with whom you frequently communicate e-mails you requesting the protocol

for accessing company records. So you e-mail her the instructions and she replies, "Thanks." No big deal, right? Wrong, because that's one more unnecessary e-mail that you need to process. It may only take you a minute or two, but these minutes add up and waste your time. Use your judgment to distinguish between important messages that require an acknowledgement and trivial messages that don't.

#### Write Complete Replies That Don't Leave The Reader Guessing

Sometimes employees respond to e-mails without even thinking, and don't give the reader any worthwhile

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just asked for the travel voucher, Maria may have replied, “Ron, I’m tied up for a while. When do you need the vouchers?” But Ron’s complete reply eliminated the need for additional back-and-forth e-mails.

### To E Or Not To E

An e-mail is *not* the only way to communicate. Look at this all-too-typical scenario of e-mails between two coworkers:

*Feb. 17—Susan (Chicago office):*

I suggest we set up a call with Chicago and Atlanta managers during the week of March 1-5 to discuss phone rep training. What day would work on your end?

*Feb. 18—Jamal (Atlanta office):* I don’t know. The feedback I’m getting is that our managers believe these calls aren’t productive.

*Feb. 22—Susan:* I’m aware of that, so this time we’re preparing a detailed agenda.

*Feb. 23—Jamal:* Our managers also believe follow-up after these calls are lacking.

*Feb. 24—Susan:* Are they talking about the lack of follow-up e-mails, timely action steps or other issues?

Five e-mails and seven days later, Susan and Jamal still haven’t resolved their issue. They forgot about an extremely important business tool—the telephone. If one of them had picked up the phone, the meeting could’ve been scheduled in minutes, instead of a week. Then, Susan or Jamal could’ve sent a confirmation e-mail documenting what they agreed to.

### Write engaging subject lines

Your e-mails compete for attention against others’ e-mails. To get your message opened and dealt with sooner, make your subject line specific. This is especially critical today when so many e-mails are opened on mobile devices by those quickly scrolling through subject lines, who often don’t bother to read the text of the message until later—or never. But explicit subject lines can engage readers immediately so they start thinking about what you need them to do.

Compare these three pairs of ordinary vs. explicit subject lines:

*Ordinary*

Assistants’ rating

*Engaging*

Assistants’ rating down 10 percent need training

*Ordinary*

Volunteers for senior center

*Engaging*

Senior center volunteers get comp time

*Ordinary*

Upcoming budget meeting

*Engaging*

Feb. 26 1 budget meeting: input by Feb. 9

### Enhancing E-Mail Efficiency Pays Off

Effectively managing e-mail communication can go a long way toward enhancing your productivity. Start by reviewing your e-mail practices and see where you can incorporate these steps, and even suggest some to coworkers. Strive to take control of e-mail—so it doesn’t take control of you.

information. Take this exchange between coworkers Maria and Ron.

*Maria:* Ron, please prepare your fourth quarter expense summary. Let me know if you need travel vouchers for any months in 2011 and if you can e-mail me the report no later than Feb. 10.

*Ron:* Okay, Maria. I’ll see what I can do. (*Ron’s reply is worthless to Maria.*)

*Here’s a more productive way for Ron to respond:*

*Ron:* Maria, please e-mail me the November travel vouchers by Jan. 25 and I’ll submit the report by Feb. 5.

What a difference! Not only does Ron explain what he needs, he specifies when he needs it (by Jan. 25). Had he

#### About the author:

Jack E. Appleman, CBC, writing instructor and coach, is author of *10 Steps to Successful Business Writing* (ASTD Press), among Amazon’s top sellers in its category. His corporate writing workshops have consistently earned outstanding evaluations. Contact: jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com, [www.twitter.com/writecoachJack](http://www.twitter.com/writecoachJack) or 845-782-2419.