

A new IABC survey suggests who is
to blame and what we can do about it

Too much

by Tudor Williams, ABC, IABC Fellow, and Ryan Williams

Eighty-five percent of respondents said e-mail overload is having a negative impact on their productivity at least some of the time.

“Too much e-mail” is one of the most frequent complaints heard in organizations today. Among the complainants are IABC members, one-third of whom use BlackBerry devices or other personal digital assistants (PDAs) and say they send and receive more e-mails than any other group of members.

In a global survey of IABC members conducted in August, a majority of communicators said they receive too much e-mail. In a similar survey conducted by NFI Research in July, senior executives had the same complaint, but in greater numbers. In IABC’s survey, 47 percent of respondents said they receive too much e-mail and text messages; this compares with 48 percent of senior executives surveyed by NFI Research in more than 50 countries. Fifteen percent of IABC communicators said they receive consider-

ably too much e-mail, compared with 33 percent of the executives. A third of the communicators (37 percent) surveyed believed they receive just the right amount, compared with only 13 percent of executives.

But most communicators and executives claim not to be among the guilty when it comes to sending all this e-mail; about half of both groups felt the amount they send is just right, while 44 percent of communicators said they send too much or considerably too much.

So who is sending all this e-mail, why, and what are the solutions to this apparently universal stressor?

Well, e-mail-enabled PDAs are either a huge part of the problem or the ultimate solution, depending on which side of the fence you are on. People seem to love or hate these little rascals. Those with BlackBerry and similar devices seem to have the greatest sense of overload: 75 percent of users said they receive too much e-mail, while 56 percent felt they send too much.

Age, geography and the organization you work for play a large role in the issue as well.

Respondents were most likely to feel they receive and send too much e-mail if they are between 45 and 55 years of age and work in organizations with more than 5,000 employees. On the other hand, those under 30 who work in an organization with fewer than 50 employees have a lesser sense of overload. Less than half of these communicators felt they receive too much e-mail, and only a third felt they send too much.

Sources of overload

The IABC survey found that the major cause of e-mail overload is external news sources and professional subscriptions. Sixty-one percent of respondents said that too many messages come from these sources. This perception is stronger in the U.S. than in the rest of the world.

More than half of the respondents felt that the amount they receive is just right from the four other sources of e-mail listed in the survey (see “Survey Stats,” page 41), though 39 percent said co-workers are the next source of too much e-mail, and 34 percent named professional networks (including IABC) as offenders.

about the survey

A link to the online survey was distributed via e-mail to 13,260 IABC members around the world. A total of 1,718 responses were received during the 10 days the survey was live in August 2006. Survey data is accurate to within ± 2.2 percent, 19 times out of 20, for a 95 percent confidence level.

e-mail!



JAMES WARDELL/MASTERFILE
WARDELL

Focus on PDA users

Communicators—even those who use BlackBerry devices—appear to receive many more e-mail messages than they send. We also wanted to know how BlackBerry use affects the number of messages sent and received each day, so we extracted this data from the responses of all the communicators surveyed.

One-third of communicators (34 percent) said they receive more than 60 messages per day, compared with one-half of those who use BlackBerry devices (50 percent) who receive the same amount. One third (31 percent) said they receive between 20 and 40 messages daily.

Just under half (45 percent) said they send between 20 and 40 messages daily, including BlackBerry users (44 percent). Almost a quarter of respondents (23 percent) said they send fewer than 20 messages per day.

Most messages are received and sent by BlackBerry users younger than 45 and working in organizations of more than 5,000 employees. The least number are received and sent by members outside of North America, those 55 or older and those who work in organizations of fewer than 1,000 employees.

Some respondents said that if the information was of interest, it was not contributing to the overload. It was the information they didn't want or need that was a problem.

e-mail efficiencies

Survey respondents suggested several tips for managing e-mail:

- Set daily quotas for individual e-mail usage—for example, sending only 20 messages per day.
- Use a complete e-mail signature so people can find you easily.
- Cease using e-mail as a default internal communication tool.
- Remember, the more e-mail you send, the more you will likely receive. Pick up the phone or go down the hall to your colleague's office—it is faster and more effective.

Managing e-mail

Communicators spend a significant amount of their workday dealing with e-mail and believe that dealing with it is negatively affecting their productivity.

Most respondents (81 percent) said their e-mail is always open. Three-quarters of respondents spend two or more hours responding to e-mail, with a third spending more than three hours. Twenty percent of BlackBerry users spend more than four hours a day with their PDA.

What effect does all this e-mail have on productivity? A huge majority (85 percent) of respondents said e-mail overload is having a negative impact on their productivity at least some of the time. Almost half (46 percent) said they are negatively affected sometimes, while almost 40 percent said they are regularly or frequently affected. Almost half (49 percent) of BlackBerry users reported a negative impact on their productivity.

Members said they manage the volume of e-mail received in a variety of ways, from using the management tools in e-mail programs such as Microsoft Outlook to simply being well organized. Many recommended dealing with a message only once: Read, and then delete or respond immediately. Others triage their e-mail accounts, removing the irrelevant and low-value messages. They then organize messages by deadline, subject or assignment. Setting priorities is one answer, often by color coding or automatic filing. Many schedule regular times to deal with e-mail and close the browser in between.

Some shut off the pop-up window and audio that come with the arrival of a new message.

Many acknowledge that their e-mail management is out of control. Yet they tolerate it by working extra hours, taking it home, or just screaming and storming out once in a while. Some commented that it is not the information that is causing the overload but the overall volume of work they are expected to do. Others said that if the information was of interest, it was not contributing to the overload. It was the information they didn't want or need that was the problem.

Cleaning up e-mail habits and usage

One of the major themes in the respondents' comments was the pressing need for e-mail "netiquette" (that is, network etiquette), policy, protocols and procedures. Suggestions included implementing a training course for all employees with access to e-mail; making training mandatory before granting continued access to the e-mail system; and focusing the training on time management and productivity improvements.

Some respondents observed that this might be a cultural issue—that is, e-mail abuse is perceived to be condoned by organizations and their leaders. Indeed, some comments implied that company leaders are part of the problem—and the potential solution: They are the role models for the abuse. They must now become the role models for reform.

Respondents suggested laying out the rules for e-mail and

enforcing them. Some solutions:

- Use clear and correct subject lines, and indicate if the message is for action now or FYI.
- Eliminate distribution lists of more than five names.
- Outlaw the use of the cc, bcc, forwarding and "reply to all" functions.
- Ban e-mails that are intended only as "butt covers" or deliver needlessly polite thank-you follow-up notes.
- For short messages, put all the information in the subject line, ending with "EOM" (end of message) to indicate that the reader doesn't need to open the rest of the message.
- Create an "e-charter," a formal, companywide set of policies, rules and guidelines about e-mail use.

Alternatives and solutions

The most popular solution to huge volumes of e-mail is the better use of e-newsletters, which can eliminate many e-mails from a particular source, especially associations or corporate departments. Bundle the pieces of information into one short message with links to the information on the company intranet.

Indeed, the intranet was identified as an underused tool that could reduce e-mail volume. Many respondents suggested redirecting all mass communication through the intranet and putting all content referenced in an e-newsletter there as well. Information on the intranet should be archived when it ceases to be timely.

Introduce an opt-in/opt-out feature for subscribing to internal e-newsletters.

Alternative technologies were seen by many as the real answer to the e-mail madness. Leading the way were collaborative tools such as wikis, blogs and portals like Microsoft SharePoint that could be accessed through an intranet. The use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds for the selective receipt of internal communiqués and newsletters was also recommended. Encourage the creation of communities of practice for sharing information around areas of common interest.

Use text messaging when you need a quick answer or you have an urgent short question. Learn to depend on and trust your co-workers to make appropriate use of text messaging.

Finally, there is the infamous BlackBerry and its role as either a reliever or creator of e-mail-induced stress. Many suggestions were made. Some respondents wanted to ban all PDAs as leading sources of much of the e-mail received. One member from Europe described a

recent cartoon, "Alex," which appears in the *Daily Telegraph*, where Alex was committed to a rehabilitation clinic for "Crackberry addiction." Others see the PDA as the only way to manage the vast amounts of information and the large network of contacts they must deal with every day.

What is clear is what the BlackBerry users told IABC in the survey: Most of them feel they receive and send too much e-mail; they spend the most amount of time each day managing the information; and they feel the most frequent and negative impact on their productivity. If they also work for an organization with more than 5,000 employees and are between 45 and 55 years of age, they are in double jeopardy.

One way we can all benefit is through better management and regulation of e-mail usage. And we must exploit the new shareware and collaborative technologies that are about to make a big impact on the way we do business. Either that or go to work for a company with fewer than 50 employees. •

about the authors

Tudor Williams, ABC, IABC Fellow, is principal of twisurveys, an organizational research and strategy development company specializing in employee, association member and customer research, based in Delta, British Columbia. He has more than 30 years of experience in communication management.

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Together, they have won seven IABC Gold Quill Awards, the most recent in 2006 for the entry "Taming the E-Mail Monster."

Survey stats

Here are highlights from IABC's global online e-mail survey. The executive survey data is from NFI Research, New York City.

Amount of e-mail received	Communicators	Executives
Considerably too much	15%	33%
Too much	47%	48%
Just right	37%	13%
Amount of e-mail sent	Communicators	Executives
Considerably too much	4%	3%
Too much	40%	34%
Just right	53%	49%
Source of e-mail	Too much	Just right
External news and professional subscription	61%	36%
Co-workers	39%	55%
Professional networks (e.g., IABC)	34%	62%
Team/department sources	29%	58%
Companywide corporate sources (senior management, HR, etc.)	23%	55%
BlackBerry users		
Yes	32%	
No	68%	
Number of times e-mail checked daily		
Never	0%	
1-5	5%	
6-10	8%	
11-25	6%	
My e-mail is always open	81%	
Amount of time to respond to e-mail daily		
1 hour or less	24%	
2 hours	40%	
3 hours	21%	
4 hours	10%	
5 hours or more	4%	
Negative impact on productivity		
No impact	3%	
Rarely	12%	
Sometimes	46%	
Regularly	30%	
Frequently	9%	