What do you do when more than two-thirds of the workforce finds a fundamental business tool to be causing significant and increasing stress, asks Aubrey Warren?

Or when that same tool is described as a “weapon of choice” in the workplace? Or when this now indispensable medium of communication is found to be damaging the bottom line? Well, not a lot, apparently.

Recent research into email use confirms what many of us have experienced:
- the volume of unnecessary email is growing
- the time spent responding to email is adding to our working hours
- the quality of email communication is generally unsatisfactory
- the desire for face-to-face communication is increasing. Despite these realities, organisations are doing little to counter the negative effects of email, leaving individuals to develop their own responses.

No wonder we find it stressful!

Of course, email offers unparalleled convenience and cost-effectiveness when used appropriately. As a result, it has naturally become our preferred means of business communication. It’s become the new “in-tray” on our desks.

But most of us don’t yet have it under control. And we certainly don’t have those who send email to us under control. Organisationally, email is overloading servers, increasing workloads and often creating, rather than resolving communication problems. The result is an out-of-control time thief whose benefits to our workplaces are being eroded by misuse.

“Email overload will continue its reign as a silent killer of the bottom line, until organisations and individual users choose to push back and create productive email protocols,” reports Christina A. Cavanagh, professor of Management Communications at the Richard Ivey School of Business in Canada.

She estimates the costs of email overload at 12 percent of corporate payrolls annually, based on employees spending an additional hour a day managing unnecessary and low-value email messages.

Professor Cavanagh has
been surveying email practice over the last four years. In addition to the time factor, two of the other major stressors she identified were that too many emails were perceived as “trivial” or “rambling”. That is, they either should not have been sent or simply didn’t make a clear point. Each of those problems, of course, directly affects productivity, satisfaction and organisational reputation.

A behavioural response

Despite its technological strength, email is actually a very simple and limited medium for conveying messages. While ideal for short, simple exchanges or for carrying attached documents, it is often unsuitable for more complex communication. And the problems that Cavanagh and others describe cannot be resolved by more technology.

That’s actually good news, because it suggests that what’s needed is a behavioural response and that need not cost a lot of money. Behavioural responses involve reflecting on the effects of current practices, identifying good and bad approaches, and adopting more productive behaviours so that the benefits of email are not negated by the negatives.

Email entered most workplaces without much training beyond teaching ourselves how to access our inbox and to send messages. As a result email practices such as how often to check email, when and how to respond, formats and etiquette were left up to individuals to work out for themselves. In addition, email turned everyone with access into a writer – as email’s convenience and apparent efficiency were embraced, written messages replaced many telephone and face-to-face exchanges.

But just as most workplaces had never trained people in how to use the tool, nor had they trained people in how to write.

It’s not hard to see how an unarguably useful tool has also become a dangerous weapon.

For email to be used effectively – and to protect employees, organisations and clients from its negative effects – emailers need to consider three key aspects of their email behaviour:

- **Managing the tool** – With one to two hours per day typically spent on email, it is important users understand how to manage both incoming and outgoing traffic so that time-wasting messages are limited. It is also important that messages are dealt with in timely and efficient ways so that they enhance rather than inhibit our workflows.

- **Ethics and etiquette** – Beyond basic courtesy lies a world of potential hazards for email users. Personal and corporate liability, policy awareness and enforcement, privacy and infringement of intellectual property rights are all issues for individuals and organisations to be aware of.

- **Communicating clearly** – Simple convenience is not the sole means of assessing email’s efficiency, let alone its effectiveness. We need to consider how our message is likely to be received.

Could there be significant misunderstanding? Would the recipient be more likely to comply with our request or participate in our proposed course of action if we spoke to them on the phone or face to face? How should messages be framed to optimise the response?

The lack of these skills is reducing email’s effectiveness and creating organisational problems – problems that do indeed go all the way to the bottom line.

In the next two articles, we’ll look at some practical responses individuals and organisations can take to reduce the stress of email and at how to guard against the dangers email can cause for individuals and their companies.