It's not just the overflowing inbox that's creating email stress. It's also what's in the messages that have been sent, and what hasn't been sent that causes stress, writes Aubrey Warren.

Email volume, demands and content all contribute to the stress that more than two-thirds of users experience. Of course, this stress travels both ways so it's important to look at how we receive and deal with messages as well as how we construct and send them to others.

Used effectively, email can help to reduce workplace stress. But getting some of the negative behaviours under control is a critical first step to being able to enjoy the real benefits email offers.

**Volume**
Filtering spam and deleting unwanted emails, while frustrating, is something we can live with. But what about “occupational spam”, that is the “just in case” or “keep you in the loop” messages (and subsequent acknowledgements, replies and queries) copied to multiple parties that account for almost 30 percent of all email.

Such messages are literally clogging inboxes and stealing our time. Beyond that, they're frequently inefficient, circulating constantly updated attached files or evolving strategies that are being developed ad-hoc and without the benefit of real-time, focused attention.

**Demands**
The apparent immediacy of email (“I sent it so you may have received it”) creates an unstated expectation of immediate response, regardless of the complexity of the issue or of other demands on our time and attention.

While email can provide same-day or even same-hour turnaround on issues, it can also easily promote all issues to the same level of priority. The inbox doesn't discriminate between important and urgent, so we have to do it instead.

Another disturbing effect of email is that many people seem to be more demanding and aggressive via the keyboard than they would typically be face-to-face. Nearly half of people surveyed by the
of email

Australian Psychological Society in 2003 reported stress arising from people making substantial and time-consuming demands they would have been unlikely to have made face-to-face or by phone. Such demands would rarely be handled so transactionally in a face-to-face or even telephone exchange.

Content

The apparently impersonal nature of email sometimes creates “cyber-cowards”, that is, people who use email to avoid personal interactions over unpleasant, awkward or negative issues.

But being unaware or unconcerned about the negative effects of our email demands and language does not mitigate those effects on message recipients.

Even when we don’t intend to be demanding, the risks of being misunderstood or misinterpreted increase as we decrease the “bandwidth” of our communication media, that is, its ability to handle multiple modes of communication such as words, tone, gestures, visuals, and feedback.

Email research is showing increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of email messages. Trivial, rambling and unclear messages are major causes of frustration for many of us. Such irritations are exacerbated by poor spelling and grammar that create hard-to-read and ambiguous messages. With the volume of email we have to deal with and the increasing demands it creates, the last thing we need is to be slowed down or confused by careless writing.

Being aware of email’s effects is an important first step in reducing stress personally and corporately. Translating that awareness into positive behaviours enables us to maximise the positives email offers.

Here are some immediate steps that can help reduce the stress that can arise from email volume, demands and content.

Volume

■ Ask yourself whether email is the best communication device for a particular exchange – even when it seems quick and easy, the implications of misunderstanding may add more time than required.
■ Cancel unwanted subscriptions and ask senders to remove your name from distribution lists you don’t need to be on.
■ Don’t respond to or forward unsolicited time-wasting messages. Just hit delete.

Demands

■ Turn off your email messenger and determine your own times for dealing with email – don’t let it interrupt your workflow unnecessarily.
■ Use folders to store messages that you have dealt with or that you plan to deal with later – keep your inbox as clean as possible.
■ Audit your inbox – what are you receiving that is important, irrelevant, interesting but not important, genuinely urgent?

Email has a tendency to present everything as equally urgent and important, but of course, it’s not.

Content

■ If someone’s message to you is unclear, inappropriate or requires face-to-face or phone communication, take the initiative – don’t let email trap you.
■ Keep messages to a single topic – this helps your reader but also helps you when they respond.
■ Indicate reasonable timeframes for response or action and always invite clarification and feedback.

Finally, remember that email is a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

Reducing the stress of email
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