

## Battling the Bulging In-box

Overflowing in-boxes and poor writing habits have undermined e-mail's potential. Here I offer advice that will contribute to more effective use of our e-mail system. (excerpts by Gary Baldwin from *Healthleaders Executive Survival Guide*)

E-mail has dramatically transformed the nature of business communication in the past few years. It is supposed to be a simpler way of communicating, but it doesn't always work out that way.

Over the past several months, our Lotus Notes system has experienced a tremendous growth in the amount of e-mails. As the amount of e-mail traffic grows, so does the need for additional storage space to hold the e-mails. Consider for a moment if the entire Kaiser Permanente system consisting of approximately 125,000 employees were using e-mail — lots of it — to solicit information needed to answer questions. While questions are simple, the answers are not.



Many feel they need specifics to find the right answer. Staff are going back and forth with e-mail trying to gather the information. It contributes to a loss in productivity and communication. People are drafting novels. Consider for a moment the alternative. Use the telephone or conduct a face-to-face meet-

ing.

### E-Mail frenzy

In theory, e-mail would seem to be tailor-made for the healthcare setting. The technology creates easily shared electronic documents with a recorded chain of authorship. Moreover, e-mail can be distributed quickly to large numbers of people either

mails a day, of which 14,000 were blocked as spam, says Dane Zemper, system administrator, electronic messaging. Two years later, the same hospitals were receiving about 260,000 daily messages, including 170,000 spam messages.

Trinity uses software to root out junk mail. Despite the nuisance of spam, e-mail's popularity as a business tool continues to grow Zemper says. "E-mail has become the focal point of the work environment," he notes. "The technology has become business-critical. Consider also, that we are now clamoring for new ways to access e-mail including through wireless devices and cell phones.

### More bad than good?

Any overemphasis on e-mail is ill-advised, experts caution. What appears to be an efficient tool for distributing messages can quickly become communications quicksand. Misuse of e-mail may contribute to distrust and lowered staff morale, says Arvind Malhotra, assistant professor of information technology management at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School.

After researching electronic communication for the last seven years, Malhotra has concluded that the technology is "more negative than positive." His research spans 100 companies, including health



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within one office or remote locations. But in the real world of healthcare, e-mail is under fire because of poor writing and growing administration hassles, led by the increasingly difficult and expensive chore of filtering spam from clogged in-boxes.

"E-mail is horribly, brutally misused," says productivity consultant Mark Ellwood, president of Toronto-based Pace Productivity Inc. According to Ellwood's research, e-mail has become a major productivity drain, as people spend increased time reading, writing and responding to e-mails. "We have devolved from in-person communication to the telephone to e-mail," he says.

As the use of the e-mail has grown, so has the maintenance of it. Take the example of Trinity Health, a 45-hospital organization based in Novi, Michigan. In August 2002, Trinity's 20 hospitals in the state were fielding about 35,000 incoming e-

systems. "The problem with e-mail are exactly the same everywhere," he says.

For one, e-mail no longer carries the cachet it once enjoyed, Malhotra says. Due to the in-box glut, e-mail messages are increasingly considered nuisances. "It has gone to the bottom of the totem pole in terms of capturing people's attention," he says. In addition, as messages are freely bandied about, employees omitted from distribution lists feel left out and even distrustful of those who sent the message, he says.

Further, e-mail reveals its biggest limitation when workers attempt to deploy it as a collaborative tool, Malhotra says. Rather than conduct in-person brainstorming sessions, cubicle-bound employees often circulate documents to co-workers, attempting to gain feedback on content. But there are often no controls on such efforts, he adds, so not all staff receive the same version of docu-

ments, or some staff may forward on documents to their own select group. "E-mail is a poor medium for brainstorming," Malhotra concludes.

And, as solo family physician Alan Dappen, M.D., contends, the technology also is a poor substitute for the telephone. "E-mail is overused as a communications tool," says Dappen, who spends most of the day on the phone with his patients,

## CUT THE GLUT

The following steps can reduce in-box stress.

- Discontinue subscriptions to mailing lists
- Send one e-mail digest, rather than multiple messages
- Refrain from constantly checking e-mail
- Set policies restricting company-wide broadcast messages
- Deploy electronic bulletin boards for collaborative efforts
- Use the telephone for one-to-one communication

who may prepay Dappen for the privilege. He runs his Vienna, Virginia practice with only one part-time staff person, a nurse. "I am perplexed by the enthusiasm to use e-mail instead of the phone," Dappen says.

In Dappen's view, e-mail is good for notifying patients that their lab results are normal, or to call him if they aren't. It's also an effective way to send patients links to articles that pertain to their illness. But as far as interviewing patients, e-mail is a waste of time, he says. He debunks recent efforts to conduct online patient-physician consultations. "There are so many subtle questions a physician must ask," he points out. "It is far easier to gather the details over the phone."

## Setting limits

E-mail also lends itself to sloppy correspondence, many experts say. "The writing you see in e-mail is often very casual," observes Kathleen McGovern, director of compliance at the Northwest Medical Facility Foundation, a Chicago-based group practice with about 525 physicians. "With memos, the writing was more deliberate. Now you see e-mails going out with no capitalization!"

Or worse, Ellwood adds, e-mails contain bizarre acronyms and meaningless symbols—so-called "emoticons"—meant to suggest the emotions that the printed word can't convey. The problem, he says, is that e-mail has grown so rapidly that few conventions exist to govern its use. He chafes at the acronyms, such as "btw" (by the way), that have become part of e-mail lexicon. "These slow down the reader, as do the sideways smiles," he maintains. "There are dozens of these to interpret."

To calm the e-mail frenzy, Ellwood advises e-

mail senders to view themselves as part of the problem. "We're all bad drivers," he says. "It's the same with e-mail. If you send four messages and copy 15 people, you're up to 60 messages. Staff should use on-on-one conversation to have a higher quality communication."

The Productivity drain is so serious that Ellwood advises organizations to limit Web access, which he argues feeds the e-mail craze. Here at Kaiser, many staff check their personal e-mail on yahoo, msn or aol sites, not to mention, using instant messengers.

Instant messengers can present a security issue by opening port 80 on the internet. This is analogous to leaving your door open with a sign for burglars to come on in and steal everything in your house. By opening port 80 on the internet, we are opening the door to hackers to steal patient records. The only instant messenger authorized is "Lotus Sametime". This subject will be addressed in another article about security.

We should all be conscientious of our use or improper use of e-mail here at Kaiser. We should consider restraints on sending messages to multiple recipients, including upper managers who are excessively copied. "Managers can tell their subordinates, don't CC you messages upwards," Ellwood says, "If you want to send something along, forward it and write a cover note explaining why you are sending the message. That would massively cut down on the volume."

By effectively managing our email use we could potentially reduce the requirement for additional storage on the email system. Imagine if one email required 1 kilobyte of space. If we all reduced five emails per day multiplied by 125,000 employees at Kaiser Permanente, we could save 174 megabytes of storage each year.