

E-Mail: Our Love-Hate Relationship

Whether on campus, at home, or traveling, most of us check our e-mail regularly, some of us almost constantly. For many years, EDUCAUSE conferences (and CAUSE and Educom conferences before that) provided e-mail access via public computers or laptop-connection tables, and attendees stood in long lines to wait to check e-mail. Others dialed-up later from their hotel rooms. Today, all EDUCAUSE conferences provide wireless access; attendees can thus maintain close involvement in activities back home and keep up with e-mail on breaks and often even during the conference sessions. In fact, due to overwhelming requests from conference attendees, wireless access will be provided on a trial basis at the next Seminars on Academic Computing. Much informal discussion takes place at this meeting, an intimate gathering of senior IT leaders in higher education, and historically e-mail access during the conference has been discouraged. But times change. Today, we can't be without our e-mail. We want to be constantly connected. E-mail: we need it.

This ubiquitous connectivity and access brings with it the problem of high volume. Most of us, at one time or another, have complained about e-mail overload. We can't keep up. Many of us find ourselves turning into file clerks, spending much time deciding how to set up our e-mail filing system and where to put a particular message. Yet despite the elaborate systems that some of us might have for reading, responding to, and filing our e-mail, sometimes critical items are completely missed in the sheer vol-

ume in our inbox. Or we quickly read an item that requires our response, intend to get back to it soon, and manage not to do so for days or weeks. In addition, the culture we have created of the expectation of instant—or very fast—response (“I just sent her an e-mail at eight, it is now ten, and I haven't heard back from her!”) adds to the challenges of juggling our many responsibilities. More and more senior executives are simply giving up reading their e-mail altogether and are delegating the task to an assistant. E-mail: we hate it.

But there are steps we can take to help manage e-mail today and to lay some groundwork for the future. These strategies will require some fundamental changes in the way we work and the way we think:

1. *Adjust your expectations of instant response.* Sending or receiving an immediate response to an e-mail is not always necessary. Communicate this idea to your staff.
2. *Don't contribute to e-mail overload.* Think carefully about who gets copied on your messages and to whom you should respond. Not every message needs a response.
3. *Set expectations about your availability through e-mail.* You may need to let staff and colleagues know that you deal with e-mail only early in the morning, for example, so that if they have something critical for you during the day, they may need to see you in person or use the telephone.
4. *Leverage other technologies.* Some work lends itself very well to groupware tools and collaborative software products. Teams can communicate with

each other through messages and chats and can share documents and organize work with these technologies, thus keeping all project information in one place and eliminating the need for e-mailing multiple copies of the same files.

5. *Encourage the vendor community to continue to improve the tools.* Having features such as the ability to change a title to a message or to file a message in multiple places would be extremely helpful in managing the volume of e-mail received.

The answer, of course, is not to stop using e-mail. If you ignore the spam (a huge problem in itself), you'll probably find that the majority of the e-mail that you receive is messages you want and need. We are using e-mail for communicating about critical projects, interacting daily with staff and the campus community, making and receiving campus announcements, monitoring discussion lists in areas critical to our jobs, getting automated updates about campus systems, doing research, maintaining ties with our professional organizations, sending and receiving reminders, coordinating task management, and even keeping in touch with our family and friends. E-mail keeps us constantly connected. It has revolutionized the way we work, and it has changed our lives. We can get more information to more people more quickly. We have removed the barriers imposed by time zones and by distance. E-mail: we love it.

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