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Introduction

The end of the year was approaching and I was struggling just to keep up with my inbox. Emails kept pouring in day after day. Whatever I did, I couldn't get through them all. Email was causing more and more stress, miscommunication, and frustration. A slight sense of despair was coming over me, as I realized that I had spent most of the year running from meeting to meeting, frenetically trying to snatch the time between to answer my emails. Finally, when I got home I would do my 'actual' work and go through the as yet unanswered emails; and still there would be a colleague the next morning asking me: 'Haven't you read my email yet?'

I felt like I was constantly playing catch-up, which was seriously denting my motivation. And I hated the fact that my schedule was being dictated by others. My personal to-do list kept on growing, left on hold while I answered my ever demanding emails. After every meeting, my inbox would be full again. I felt trapped in a vicious circle I couldn't escape. How great it would be if I could actually decide for myself when and how to communicate and collaborate with others.

I asked myself what I was actually contributing

to society. Was it of any value at all? What I wanted was to make a meaningful contribution as a professional, and have some impact on the world around me. Taking stock of the situation, I arrived at a very sad conclusion: 'I'm a master of being in meetings, writing plans and replying to emails in the meanwhile. That's it! That's all I do day in, day out. By the time I retire, my contribution to society will have amounted to next to nothing.'

The time had come. *I decided to quit email.* I made it my New Year's resolution: 'On January 1st, 2011, I will quit email. I will pull the plug on my inbox and from that point on use only online collaboration platforms.'

For the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' And whenever the answer is 'No' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

STEVE JOBS, FOUNDER AND FORMER CEO OF APPLE

Sure, I was a little apprehensive at first. Would I miss out on things? Would those online collaboration platforms really do the trick? How would others react to my decision? But the overriding feeling was actually excitement; I wanted to find out if it really could benefit me, my employers, and other organizations.

Now I can finally say that quitting email has brought me even more than I had ever dared to imagine; a lot more than the mere relief of not having to open my inbox. *I could never have*

imagined that the way I collaborated would change so dramatically. Not only was I now able to work much more efficiently using other tools but I also had real contact with my colleagues again.

These are the experiences I want to share, which is why I have started the We Quit eMail movement; and meanwhile the first companies and individual members have joined.[1] In this book, I will share the personal experiences and best practices of myself and others for you to take advantage of. Are you ready? Let's go!

Kim Spinder, March 2014

1

Why email doesn't do the job anymore

Email is electronic mail.

WIKIPEDIA

From a historical perspective, email is actually a rather outdated medium. While most online media have an ever shorter life span as they are overtaken by better and more user-friendly technology and platforms with a greater reach — just consider MySpace — the first email was sent back in 1971, by Ray Tomlinson, a programmer from the U.S.

The inventors of email would cry if they foresaw its slow evolution.[2]

DREW HOUSTON, DROPBOX CEO

An email is basically nothing more than a digitalized letter. Still, email as a medium has changed over the decades, starting out as a messaging service and turning into a document sharing and storage tool.[3] Actual communication between individuals has long disappeared from the top five of email functions.[4]

Email is widely used for collaboration, while it was never designed or developed with that in mind. Not surprisingly, it is precisely when using email for collaboration that we come up against its limitations.

If email was invented today, it probably would not have survived as a technology.

LUIS SUAREZ, KNOWLEDGE MANAGER AT IBM[5]

Sending an email has become the most mundane of operations. It has become so commonplace that we barely dwell on the implications. But there is indeed a downside to email. Particularly because of the huge volume of emails we have to go through, increasing numbers of people find it hard to use email effectively and it even becomes a source of stress. You know that red dot that tells you that you have 148 unread emails, that dot you keep seeing out of the corner of your eye? That dot made me restless. If you're not careful, email will control your life and be the first thing you think about in the morning and the last thing on your mind before going to sleep. I had gotten into the habit of checking my email before going to bed, which often resulted in troubled sleep as my mind would be on what I would have to do the next day. And I'm not the only one: research has shown that technology has affected our sleep. Checking your email or posting something on Facebook is very likely to lead to a restless night. A third of us sleep only five to six hours a night as a result.[6]

Technology is reciprocal. It gives you something, but it also takes something from you. Nowadays, being disconnected is a luxury.

DAAN ROOSEGAARDE, ARTIST AND INNOVATOR

In my job as a civil servant, emails flooded in every day. Whatever I did, it became harder and harder to clear my inbox. Answering emails alone was almost a full-time job. I tried everything to keep it under control: from implementing email etiquette

rules to learning time-management skills such as those of the Getting Things Done method.[7] Nothing worked. I was still left with stacks of emails at the end of every day. It made me feel as if I never got any work done. I was stressed and less productive. Cutting back on the number of emails I sent seemed impossible, but in 2011 — by which time I had become an independent entrepreneur — I took the plunge.

Digital stranglehold

It would, of course, be unfair to blame it all on email. Let me be clear on one thing: I have nothing against email as a medium. I do, however, have a problem with the way we keep each other in a digital stranglehold. I was also guilty of that, circulating volumes of information by email that no one could reasonably be expected to process. I had to start with myself.

However, when you really want to change the way you collaborate with others, changing your own behavior alone is not enough, you need to get the entire organization and everyone you work with on board. And that is quite a job. For me, email has turned into a symbol of bureaucracy.

Before I finally pulled the plug on it, I made a last-ditch effort to regulate my and my co-workers' email usage. We made arrangements on how to communicate with each other. This not only confronted us with some hard facts (we turned out to be set in ways we had inherited from our predecessors), it also proved to be a lot of fun, because

we had never really discussed our collaborative practices. Everyone did the things they thought were right. When we looked at what we wanted to achieve, who our emails were intended to inform, and who took the final decisions, in short: when we subjected the communication process to close scrutiny, we came to the conclusion that it could all be done a lot more efficiently.

First attempt: e-tiquette

We agreed on a 'correct' way of using email, hoping that would reduce the 'clutter' in our inboxes and enable us to empty them faster. The main points from our e-tiquette code were:

- Give your emails a clear subject to make it easier for recipients to scan and search emails.
- Describe a clear call to action: be specific on what you expect the recipient to do and by what date.
- Be brief: no more than five to ten lines.

Email has turned into a symbol of bureaucracy.

- Before sending an email, consider whether there is another, better way of getting your message across.
- CCing is pointless.
- BCCing is prohibited.

Second attempt: return to sender

Sticking to the above e-tiquette rules proved far from straightforward in practice, as we often lacked the required discipline because we had been doing things differently for years.

We simply couldn't get email-based collaboration right. Although we moved information around, we mostly failed to consolidate it. Email created a certain culture among the workforce that produced a lot of mutual irritation. Emails were sometimes blindly passed along without consultation, just to get rid of them (for a while). Email was also used to get actions onto someone else's to-do list, with the sender expecting the recipient to act immediately.

On top of that, the idea that emails always require an instant reply had taken root among a large section of the workforce, who would subsequently be annoyed whenever they were kept waiting for a reply. I decided to draw attention to this by returning irrelevant emails and actions that I did not want on my plate, like wrongly delivered mail, typing 'return to sender' in the subject line.

Duty to supply

In spite of these measures, my inbox was still chock-full with announcements, requests, tasks, newsletters, etc. Whenever I was out of the office

for a day, and had no time to reply to emails, my inbox would be overflowing the next day. In the worst case, a project would even grind to halt as all team members were waiting for my reply. Given that we had agreed on a 'duty to supply' information instead of a 'duty to gather,' it was up to me to make sure everyone was up to date on the latest. In case of miscommunication, I, the supplier of information, was always the one getting the blame: 'You didn't CC me' or: 'I wasn't invited to that meeting.'

Email is not a messaging protocol. It's a to-do list. Or rather, my inbox is a to-do list, and email is the way things get onto it. But it is a disastrously bad to-do list.

PAUL GRAHAM, PROGRAMMER, WRITER, AND INVESTOR[8]

File 13

Your email inbox is like 'file 13'. Everything ends up in one great repository: requests, minutes for meetings, responses to questions to a group of colleagues, brief announcements, and newsletters. Sometimes people literally use their inbox as a filing cabinet. We had one colleague who did that, and whenever he was away certain knowledge was literally 'locked away' in his inbox, depriving others of access to important information.

Email bombs

And with every opinion, nuance, and addition, the archive gets fuller and fuller. Whenever our team had to make decisions, our inboxes turned into a

veritable barrel bomb of emails. We would send at least sixty emails back and forth before making a decision.[9] This whole process was chaotic and produced miscommunication, as some would hit 'reply to all' while others replied privately. You had to stay on top of these emails, because you could very easily lose track of the thread and find yourself unable to make sense of the conversation. Who had replied to whom? Do they want me to do something or has a decision already been made? It sometimes took me half an hour just to figure out that an issue had already been resolved. Starting with the most recent email wasn't the answer either, because then I'd miss the underlying information.

Status unknown

What I found difficult with email is that it was never instantly clear what had priority. After all, all emails are received in the same place. The only way of finding out what requires your attention first is to open them one by one and assess what to do with them. Alongside truly important messages, my inbox would be littered with general announcements, such as: 'Jim is on sick leave,' 'birthday cake at 10am,' 'the printer is down' and 'the printer is back up,' or with common errors such as: 'Sorry, forgot the attachment,' 'this one was intended for the other Kim' or private emails that were accidentally sent to the whole team.

Unnecessary CCs and secret BCCs

And how about copying emails to colleagues who are not required to do anything with the

information? CCing the whole group 'for information purposes' is often basically only a way of letting everyone know how busy you are or how great a job you are doing.

Whenever an ongoing discussion becomes heated, you suddenly see the manager's name appear in the CC line, as a way of gathering evidence against you, or to say: 'I would like the boss to weigh in.' It does, however, also work the other way round, as there are managers who want to be CCd to be able to keep an eye on things. When I, for example, would contact a director who was above my immediate superior in the pecking order, I was required to CC my superior, so that she knew I was contacting her boss.

SPENDING
MOST OF
YOUR
DAY
CHECKING
EMAILS?

#WQM

So what do you do for a living?

Oh, well, I'm an Emailer.