The Email Onslaught – Say No to Slavery!

Not only are people everywhere collapsing under the weight of paper at work, they are also straining under the weight of emails.

There's a curve to this: people get email, they begin to use it, they like it, they use it more, and they become overwhelmed by it. I know people who're afraid to take a week's vacation because of what they're going to find when they log on. You may be one of them. There's a parallel curve at work: we train staff on a new email system for a day, and they learn to use enough features to communicate. But we don't train them further and they don't know half of the system's features to use it *efficiently*. We don't maintain an ongoing review of how the staff is using the system, and they clutter it up with junk. Information distribution and storage grow out of control.

Ever heard of entropy? It's a law, like gravity. It says that all systems move toward growing disorder and that on the way there, they get more and more complex. That includes the system you use now. Only vigilant maintenance actions and efforts to *simplify* things can delay the onslaught of entropy.

We're on the verge of a quantum compounding of the problem through the widespread adoption of groupware, which allows infinitely greater distribution of all information to everyone.

We often fail to distinguish between information that we might want to *read* and information that requires us to *act*. A distribution list that disgorges 200 messages a day totally obscures, the three messages that require action. In groupware environments, the act of monitoring everyone's comments across 20 databases is more befitting the KGB than front-line workers.

We also ignore the trade-off between sharing and reviewing information on the one hand and acting profitably on that information on the other hand. Which produces value?

We're waiting for better filters and smarter agents to save us, but maybe we have to save ourselves.

At the individual level, we need to train knowledge workers to sort and process large volumes of information and work. The colleague who saves 5,000 uncategorized messages, prints all his or her mail to read or is too backlogged to answer e-mail requests this week isn't contributing to a high-performance organization, virtual or otherwise.

At the group level, we must establish a process to end the balance points in our information systems between distributing critical information and performing productive work. We need to monitor the performance of human users as closely as we do network servers. Then we can design and continuously improve communication protocols that allow humans to keep up and maybe even get ahead.

But then again, the thought of being able to keep up with one's e-mail may be as hopelessly idealistic as Rousseau's.

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