



April 2018

You've Got Mail?

How You and Your Team Can
Avoid Email Overload

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Introduction

A 2014 study conducted by recruitment agency Office Team AG found that 60% of employees in Germany and Switzerland feel plagued by emails, and, as a result, suffer from constant stress.¹

And who isn't familiar with this issue? We send email after email, day after day, and our digital correspondences continue to fill our inboxes with no end in sight. These emails eat into our time for doing work which really matters, frustration levels are at a constant high, we always seem to be left waiting after sending project update requests, and the list just goes on.

The results from a 2017 report on emails should therefore come as no surprise: the Email Statistics Report conducted by market research firm The Radicati Group estimated that 269 billion emails are sent each day², of which 80% constitute "waste"³. "Waste" because they are mostly designed to keep people in the loop by including them in the CC (carbon copy) field, or worse: they simply do not contain anything of relevance for the work at hand.

¹ <http://www.zeit.de/karriere/beruf/2014-01/studie-mails-unterbrechungen>

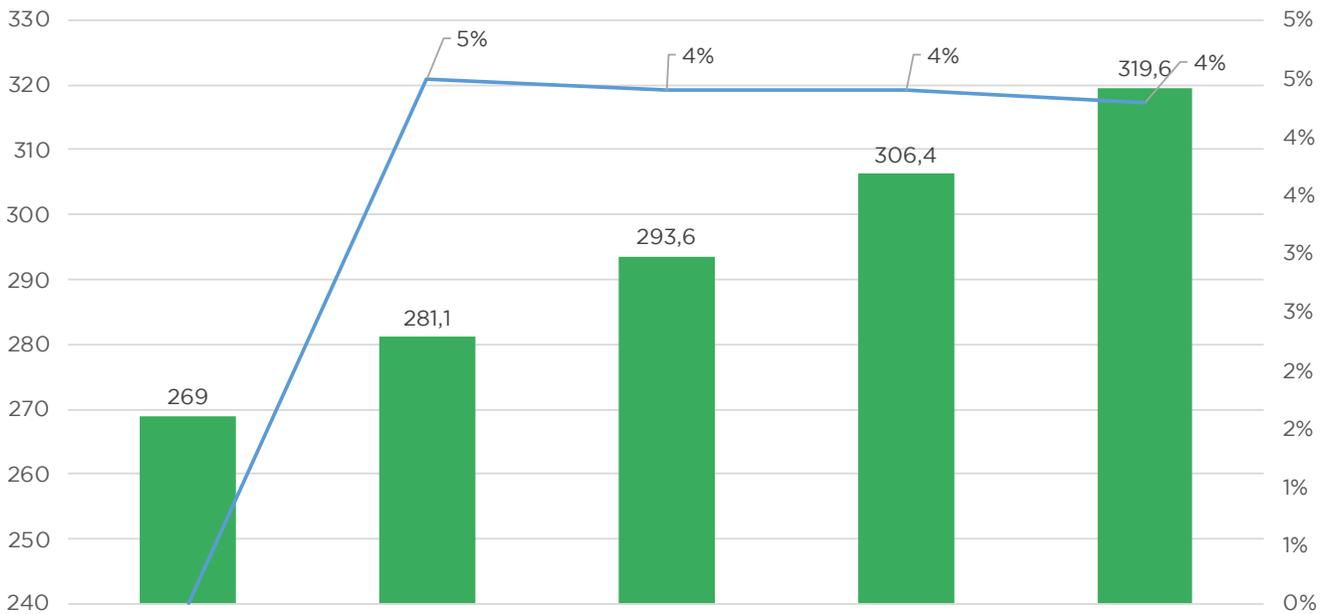
² <http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Email-Statistics-Report-2017-2021-Executive-Summary.pdf>

³ <https://www.fastcompany.com/3015643/why-80-percent-of-your-emails-are-a-total-waste>

The solution seems obvious: do away with email! Due credit should be given to France, whose government enacted a law in early 2017 banning sending work emails outside of office hours. (Although there doesn't seem to be any penalties for violating it.)

But is a ban on email really the answer?

Number of Emails Sent and Received Worldwide (in Millions)



Source:
<http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Email-Statistics-Report-2017-2021-Executive-Summary.pdf>



The Problem with Email

In and of itself, emailing make communicating much easier—when it’s used in the right way. However, the figures mentioned previously point to a number of rising issues:

- If you are not careful, your emails can take over to the point where there is less time for actual work.
- If you choose to receive email notifications, you are signing up to receive between 30–200 interruptions over the course of your workday! Email notifications are a notorious concentration-destroyer: the University of California—Irvine found in a study that it takes us 23 minutes on average following an interruption to regain our previous level of concentration⁴.
- Emailing is often used as an easy excuse to avoid responsibility for a task or project. With every email exchange, the responsibility is passed on to the inbox of the email recipient, who often does not have all of the information needed. This naturally leads to frustration and delays.

⁴ <https://www.ics.uci.edu/~gmark/chi08-mark.pdf>

These problems, and email overload in particular, can be attributed to the fact that emails are “free” from the user’s perspective and communication is very simple. In the past, if you wanted to send information to several people or place an order, you had to write a letter, copy it for the other recipients, stick it in an envelope, write out the address, and take it to the post office. The introduction of fax machines made this process much simpler, but the onset of the electronic mail meant that exchanging correspondence needed almost no time at all and required very little effort. Whether an email is sent to one or ten recipients has a negligible effect on the sender’s workload.

Don’t Be Fooled

Let’s do a calculation: a sender takes five minutes to write an email. The recipient takes one minute to read and understand the message. Altogether, the email costs at least six minutes in total—most likely more, as we tend to read emails multiple times: the first time on our smartphones where we first receive the email, the second time in the office when we need to “digest” its content, and the third time when we finally respond. But more on this later in Suggested Solution #4.

If the sender sends the email to ten recipients, there is little extra work involved. He just has to add the recipients and he’s done. But each recipient needs at least one minute to read the message. This means that the total time invested in the email is now at least 15 minutes. That may not sound like very much for a single email, but considering the sheer volume of emails we send, receive, and read every day, and you’ll see how the time spent on emails can quickly add up.



— Suggested Solutions

Companies can use technology to put in place certain arrangements that reduce some of the pressure put on employees to be reachable at all times. But internal and external team discussions can also take at least some of the sting out of the negative aspects of emails. We have five solutions that may work for you:

1. A Code of Conduct is Worth a Thousand Emails

Internal emails are a major contributor to email overload. On top of this, they are often used to send content which would be better communicated via other channels:

Your House is Burning. Do You Email the Fire Department?

It is worth devising a mutually agreed-upon guideline for internal communication. A driver's license for the digital workplace, so to speak. Unlike real driver's licenses, the "road rules" will vary from company to company. Each team works in different ways and this must be taken into account.

Such a code of conduct would provide answers to questions like:

- How do we communicate within the team?
- Which programs do we use for which communication purposes?
- When do we send internal emails?
 - Answer: ideally, as seldom as possible. The right tool should be used according to what is being communicated.
 - Example: work chat in Evernote, comments in Google Docs, comments on tasks in Todoist or Asana.
- What is the expected response time per channel?
 - Example: SMS and Slack messages should be answered immediately, but emails can be replied to within 24 hours.
- Is there a limit on email length?
 - Example: Internal emails should be short enough not to require scrolling. Or they should be a maximum of five sentences long as per the [five.sentenc.es](https://www.fivesentences.com/) philosophy.
- How do we use the CC and BCC fields?

How to Draft a Code of Conduct

The Evernote team in Zurich successfully introduced such a code of conduct. Team members came together to produce a list on a whiteboard. This covered everything that bothered them about how things were being done. The team leader left the room so that the team could speak freely. The issues were then discussed with the team leader and approaches to improving these aspects were mutually agreed upon. After two hours of discussion and deliberation, the team now had a code of conduct tailored to its needs. Each team member signed the Code, which has been applied without issues ever since.

Expectations are clear and communication problems in daily business are now few and far between. If you would like to check out the details of the official Evernote Zurich Code of Conduct or use it as a template, it can be downloaded [here](#)⁵. If you would prefer to receive the Code via email (in spite of email overload) then email zurich@evernote.com.

⁵ <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s280/sh/0b14a174-9e85-48e1-969e-7f5bcc034a6e/9170fa266c2ee662>

2. Don't Use Email for Every Piece of Communication

If you cannot meet with someone in person, you have a few options. Every kind of communication has its pros and cons:

- ++ fully applicable
- + somewhat applicable
- not applicable

	Phone call	Video conference	Instant messaging	Letter	Email
Reaction speed	++	++	++	--	+
Real-time discussion	++	++	+	--	--
Multimedia	--	++	+	--	++
Documentation of communication	--	+	+	++	++
Little effort regardless of the number of recipients	--	--	++	--	++
Risk of misunderstandings	niedrig	niedrig	mittel	hoch	hoch

The main advantage of emails is asynchronous communication. The recipient can read your email—whenever, wherever, and on whatever device they want. However, the drawback is that only a fraction of the entire communication can be conveyed. Smileys and emojis may help, but nonverbal cues are still lost. Direct conversation may incorporate irony, wit, and allusions. In an email, these are very likely to be interpreted incorrectly or missed entirely.

As direct dialog and nonverbal communication are not possible, it's best to avoid sending negative or sensitive messages via email. Apart from the fact that emails are anything but a secure form of communication, the recipient has no way of digging deeper or reading between the lines. Therefore, negative or sensitive messages should ideally be conveyed directly, in person or over the phone—even though this is much harder, of course. But out of fairness to the other person, you should not hide behind an email.

Given their asynchronous nature, emails are also unsuitable for complex conversations, which often get drawn out over the course of an entire day or week. This does not allow for a smooth exchange, as each participant has to check back through the old emails to understand what has already been discussed and what is still outstanding.

That is why synchronous means of communication such as the telephone, direct conversation, video conferencing, and even instant messaging are much better for conversations.

These two examples show that email is not always the best form of communication. Therefore, it is worth considering which tool is best suited to your message or detailing in a code of conduct (see Suggested Solution #1) which tool should be used for which communication⁶. The 3 Ws Method can be used as a rule of thumb and applied for all forms of communication. Each conversation should be clear about **Who** does **What** by **When**. If a “W” is missing, there are bound to be misunderstandings.

⁶ <https://blog.evernote.com/de/virtuelle-team>

3. Use Attachments Infrequently

One of the biggest inefficiencies in today's working world is the constant revision of documents. If several employees are jointly involved in editing a document and the latest version is being emailed hither and thither, the risk of some people not working on the latest version is very high. This results in version conflicts. Parts of the document are then revised, but the latest information is already contained in a different file version.

Therefore, get into the habit of sending links to documents rather than the documents themselves. Store files on your server, such as Google Drive, Dropbox, OneDrive, or Evernote, so that all employees always have access to the latest versions.

If you have to collaborate frequently with your colleagues and employees on documents, check whether it is worth using software specially designed for such purposes—such as the G Suite (Google Docs/Sheets) or Office 365. These allow everyone to work simultaneously on the same documents.

Email attachments are mainly useful for external communication. Internally, it is better to link to cloud storage.

4. Treat Your Inbox Like Your Real-World Mailbox

Good email practice means treating your digital inbox just like your real-world mailbox. When we receive mail, we sit ourselves down and begin to review and sort it, deciding what requires immediate attention: what can you file away right now? What do you need to forward to colleagues? What must you discuss with your supervisor? What can you discard?

We can apply the exact same approach to our digital mailbox. Therefore, get used to reviewing each email just once and then immediately deciding what should be done with it. There are a range of options you can take:

1. Take note of the content and delete the email.
2. No response is needed, so archive the email immediately.
3. Forward the email—delegate, in other words. You might place the email in your “Wait” folder so that you can ask about the outcome at the right time.
4. Respond immediately to the email.
5. Postpone your response to later. Add the task involved to your to-do list and happily file away the email (either in a to-do folder or archived as normal). Once you wish to complete the task, you can very quickly retrieve the email.

Use these five options to very quickly and simply get a handle on your inbox.

5. Emails Are Virtual Letters

All communication is your personal business card and your company's business card. It affects how others see you and your company. This means that you should consider emails as virtual letters and formulate them accordingly.

However, feel free to make them somewhat briefer, as this is acceptable and frequently even welcome given email overload. Nevertheless, when writing to external recipients in particular, you should address them correctly, sign off properly, and watch out for your spelling—even on a smartphone.

Of course, you can be somewhat less formal in internal emails. Discuss within the team which tone is acceptable in emails and how brief you should be.

You might think of the **KISS** principle (**K**ep **I**t **S**hort and **S**imple) when writing to both external and internal recipients. Always keep in mind that your recipients may receive dozens or even hundreds of emails each day, just like you. They will surely appreciate you getting straight to the point so that they do not have to scroll to read your entire email.

Here's a little trick: you can use your email subject line to promote yourself a little. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we all decide which email is important and should be opened first based on the sender and the subject. If we can tell immediately from the subject line what the email is about, we are more likely to open that email and deal with it first.

6. BCC Emails: A Breach of Confidence

In teams, we always try to avoid discussions about people who are not present. However, we don't follow the same customs when it comes to emailing—specifically when it comes to BCC. When sender A sends an email to recipient B, then recipient B assumes that this is a private communication. However, if sender A includes recipient C on BCC, this is a form of covert communication. If recipient B discovers this at a later point, he may consider this a breach of confidence.

This betrayal of confidence can easily be exposed, and it happens more often than you'd expect. All it takes is a slip-up from recipient C on the "Reply All" button and the game is up. With that said, as a general rule of thumb, all communication should be transparent, open, and conducted in good faith from the beginning.

7. Once an Email is Sent, You Relinquish Control of It!

We don't always realize that we're relinquishing control of our emails once we click the "Send" button. The recipient can...

- ... forward your email to others without you being aware.
- ... edit your email before forwarding it, therefore not only sharing it with unintended recipients but also changing the content.

Therefore, be careful of what you write:

- Only write what you would be comfortable having others (including a judge) read.
- Sensitive topics are better dealt with right away by phone or in person.



— Conclusion

All it takes for good, effective email practice is some simple logic and consistency. The main thing is to decide what works best for you and your team. Remember the analogy of a “normal” mailbox: if you can treat your email inbox just the same, you will already be well on your way.

We’re happy to discuss how you can get a better handle on email overload and help you implement a strategy. Come and talk to us—by email, if you prefer. 😊

Further Reading

Books

Unsubscribe by Jocelyn K. Gleib
<http://jkglei.com/unsubscribe/>

Online Articles

E-Mail-Flut: Diese zwei Fragen solltest du dir stellen (in German)
<https://ivanblatter.com/e-mail-flut-zwei-fragen/>

So tragen Sie den E-Mail-Berg nach dem Urlaub ab (in German)
<https://ivanblatter.com/e-mail-berg-abtragen/>

Four Ways Virtual Teams Fail (and How to Fix Them)
<https://evernote.com/blog/four-ways-virtual-teams-fail/>

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Ivan Blatter is a personal trainer in time management. He shows customers how they can double their productivity and achieve more without working themselves to the bone. He helps solopreneurs and entrepreneurs improve their personal time management so that they can unleash their full potential for a successful business. Ivan also works with companies to boost team productivity and works together with them to help them achieve their goals. He believes in keeping his methodologies as simple and easy-to-use as possible, and always tailors his trainings to the needs of the team or individual.

Ivan has written many articles on time management, the organization of work, and working methods on ivanblatter.com for years, and his website has now grown to become one of the largest and most successful blogs on time management and workplace productivity in the German-speaking world. He also provides interesting and useful knowledge on personal time management and team productivity in his two podcasts. His book *Arbeite klüger - nicht härter* (Work Smarter - Not Harder) contains practical hints and tips on making best use of your time.



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Fully immersed in the world of digital communication, design, and business productivity, Manuel has a comprehensive understanding of the digital market.

At Evernote, he heads the Sales and Account Management Team in the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East, and Africa). In this role, he helps companies develop strategies that maximize their productivity and efficiency throughout their entire organization. Manuel also lectures on the topics of productivity and business design at various universities and is on the jury of the Mobile Business Award of the University of St. Gallen.

He co-founded the PinFriends fashion brand in 2017 and creates small pieces of art in cooperation with local designers.

Since 2015, Manuel has been writing and curating articles on productivity for Scope (<https://thescope.com/produktivitaet>), an innovative Swiss news startup. On his own website, voltandgestalt.com, he also curates the best content from the web, uncovering key trends and developments in culture, design, and work. The site's newsletter has been rated "outstanding" by Mailchimp.