

There are ways to ease e-mail overload

by Pam Adams

There are moments when e-mail's easy access and swift convenience leave us in awe.

"What did we do without it?" asks Rita Ali.

Then there are all those other bold-faced moments Ali knows well - the daily deluge of e-mail messages piling up in the inbox.

One day recently, Ali, director of diversity at Illinois Central College, whittled her inbox total down to a paltry 219 messages. But that was only after she transferred 1,500 e-mails into archives.

E-MAIL ONSLAUGHT - For every e-mail junkie trying to break the habit, there are a lot more office workers simply trying to control the onslaught. CNS Illustration by Scott Hinton. The remaining 219 messages, she says, represent less than two days' worth of communications. Ali gets very little spam or personal e-mail; still, she can count on receiving an average of 200 e-mail messages a day. Most of it is related to ICC, and much of it is useful for future reference. Which means Ali isn't deleting a lot.

She constantly files messages into folders and subfolders.

"If I get too far behind, I take it all and dump it into a folder called archives," she says. "It doesn't take but a few days to get backlogged again."

Sigh. One woman's instant access and convenience is another woman's backlog. With threats of spam and viruses increasingly diminished by sophisticated filters, e-mail's other foibles are attracting more attention.

E-mail has its attractions. The Wall Street Journal recently profiled e-mail addicts. But for every e-mail junkie trying to break the habit, there are a lot more office workers simply trying to control the onslaught. That's why ICC began offering a class on using Microsoft Windows Outlook last fall.

"People know how to send e-mail; they don't know how to manage it," says Jennifer Spengler, an assistant professor in ICC's business and information systems department, who teaches the class.

Or they've created their own, often wayward, management system.

"I don't file e-mail," admits Prasad Perini, a software engineer who oversees software development for Advanced Information Services.

Perini estimates he gets about 100 legitimate e-mails a day. One day last week, his inbox held 5,000 messages.

He creates folders for certain projects and topics. Otherwise, if he needs to reference an old message in his inbox, he searches by date or the person's name. He archives messages every six months or once a year onto his hard drive, which reduces the load on the company server and backup systems.

"Managing my e-mail has not become unmanageable yet," he says.

Sally McGhee, a productivity consultant and author of a book of organizing tips for Microsoft Outlook, cites studies that show the average person spends up to an hour a day searching for stored documents and e-mail messages.

E-mail organizing habits tend to mirror organizing habits in general, Spengler says. Deleters tend not to have many stacks of paper on their desks either. Pack rats typically hoard e-mail messages, too.

But in many offices, e-mail also comes with an overseer, an information technology director whose job is partly to track who is taking up all the space on the server and slowing down the system.

ICC's IT director creates a "hit list" of the biggest users and e-mails it to everyone at the school. Ali is usually in the top five, if not higher.

"It's embarrassing," she says.

And one more e-mail to deal with.

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