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## Going on an E-mail Diet

A CIO is waging a campaign to cut office e-mail traffic by 25%.  
By Mary K. Pratt , Computerworld , 08/10/2009

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CIO Tony Murabito surveys workers at his company every year, asking them about their experiences and expectations regarding the IT systems they use. The responses usually focus on technical issues, which is why last year's comments about e-mail shocked him.

"Let's blow up the Reply-to-All key!"

"Why can't people get to the \*&!% point!"

"I am in the field all day selling and come home to 60 to 80 e-mails."

"There was just an overwhelming sense that there were no controls [on e-mail] in place," Murabito says.

CIOs are in the business of delivering technology, not curtailing its use. But after seeing those comments, Murabito decided to do just that. His goal for his company, Cubist Pharmaceuticals Inc. in Lexington, Mass., is to cut the number of e-mails by 25% by training employees how to better use one of the basic tools of the modern office.

This e-mail problem isn't unique to Cubist, says Dianna Booher, CEO of Booher Consultants Inc. in Grapevine, Texas, and author of *E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication*. "I hear a lot of complaining, and there's not a lot of people doing something about it," she says. "But I think people will have to do something, because it's blocking productivity."

Booher's surveys of clients have shown that 58% of workers spend up to three hours a day on e-mail. Though some of that e-mail time is undoubtedly related to getting their jobs done, she says, much of it is a waste because messages are either poorly written or have little or nothing to do with business.

To be clear, this isn't a spam problem. Workers at Cubist are complaining about the excessive amount of business-generated e-mails, Murabito says. They say they trudge through confusing and pointless messages because senders mindlessly hit "Reply to All" just to say something like "Thanks."

"It's a kind of internal spam. It's low-value, low-priority communication that clogs up in-boxes and creates a nonstop stream of interruptions," says Mike Song, lead author of *The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your Email Before It Manages You*, and CEO of Cohesive Knowledge Solutions Inc., an e-mail and meeting training company in Guilford, Conn.

Song says he's not surprised by the situation, because most employees don't receive any training on [how to effectively use e-mail](#).

## Big ROI

Murabito says his research showed that cutting e-mail communications could help each Cubist worker recover an estimated 15 to 20 days of lost productivity annually -- or 7,000 to 9,000 days every year for the whole organization.

"I never had a project before that could have that kind of ROI," he says, noting that his investment was mostly internal staff time and about \$50,000 in training costs.

Murabito says tackling the problem is yielding important benefits for the IT organization, too.

For example, the volume of e-mail was bogging down the company's systems. Regular maintenance is scheduled to run from Saturday mornings to Sunday evenings. That was once enough time to run a typical integrity check, but as the amount of e-mail grew, two days was no longer enough to run through and clean up corrupted objects in every mailbox.

Murabito determined that if he could cut back on the volume of e-mails sent and stored, he could once again work within that time frame.

He approached this problem as he does any IT project: He developed a business case to convince other executives that it was worth tackling. Response from the start was very positive.

"I had done numerous presentations to senior management, and I have never had one go quicker and smoother," Murabito says.

He laid out his goals, outlining a plan that called for providing tools and tips to help employees be more productive in managing their e-mail, and training them on communication guidelines and best practices with the help of the company's contracted trainer. He also pulled together a team of employees from various departments who established ground rules.

Not surprisingly, Murabito encountered some resistance. He set up a program that would clean out everyone's deleted-mail folders every night and delete all sent e-mails that were over six months old, but some workers resisted, saying they needed those messages.

That was an eye-opener.

"It showed they were using e-mails for more than point-to-point communication. Some were using it for document management," Murabito says. This revealed that workers, such as those in the clinical and regulatory areas, need better document management tools (which he's delivering).

Cubist's "Project E-mail Etiquette" is still under way, but Murabito says he's confident that he can reach the goal of cutting e-mail by 25% once everyone is trained later this year. He's already hearing reports of success. Consider the subject line of one e-mail Murabito received: "Just reduced my inbox from over 14k emails to 1460 {eom}."

Given his success so far, Cubist executives have enlisted Murabito to tackle that other big productivity drain: meetings.

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