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E-mail, task-switching, and productivity

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By Jeff Patmore, head of strategic university research, BT

In 2007 a colleague at the Cambridge University Business School told me that he felt that e-mail was becoming insidious [proceeding in a gradual, subtle way, but with harmful effects]. It struck me at the time as a strange thing to say, but none the less I decided that I should, at some time in the future, investigate this further.

In 2010 we initiated a research project examining how communications technology is impacting people's lives at home and at work, this gave me that opportunity I needed.

To my surprise, several of the experts we interviewed as part of the research, mentioned the subject of e-mail in the context of task-switching. Our literature reviews in the UK, US and China also referenced the negative effects of frequent task-switching and specifically the intrusive effects of e-mail. Importantly, the effects seem to be cross-cultural.

These are a few of the observations made by leading academics when asked about the impact of technology on our working lives:

- The frequency of distraction is inversely correlated with productivity
- Constantly breaking attention means that people must do more work just to sustain concentration
- Excessive task-switching affects the depth of thinking and the quality of decision-making

The more research we carried out the more these initial views were re-enforced.

We can fool ourselves into thinking we are being more productive by constantly switching tasks, for example regularly reading and answering e-mail while simultaneously undertaking a possibly more intellectually demanding task such as report writing or attending a virtual meeting. However, our research has indicated that for the majority of people, that feeling of productivity is an illusion masking an actual deterioration of both work rate and quality.

Increased productivity

I used to think that some colleagues in both business and academia who had adopted a mode of working where they only looked at their e-mail two or three times a day were a little strange, but following these research findings and personal reflection, I am no longer so sure. Obviously there is no one right work or communications model for everyone, but finding a way to reduce task-switching either through personal discipline or through some different mode of working would seem to generally increase productivity and is therefore worth considering.

In Australia we have an outstanding young researcher at Victoria University Melbourne, Natasha Dwyer, she sums up the current changes in our lives very well: "Communication that used to take days now takes minutes, calculations and processes that used to take weeks can be done in seconds, and this in turn makes nearly everything seem more urgent and more pressing. Better interface and system design could help people manage their time and interaction with technology in a more optimal way.

Thinking clearly

For example, artificially re-introducing delays, such as a delayed e-mail send, might keep channels of communication and collaboration open while easing time pressure, reducing stress and giving everyone time to think and process information".

Our research is indicating that how many of us work today is not as productive as we believe it to be. If our role permits e-mail to be accessed only occasionally then this can be a change that will improve both our knowledge retention and the quality of our decision-making. Using breaks in a task to answer e-mail could probably be time better spent on thinking time and reflection, enhancing our activities rather than detracting from them.

Some words of wisdom from our lead researcher at the University of Cambridge, Tanya Goldhaber - "It is imperative that all research about current use of ICT be studied objectively. Both excessive fear and optimism must be met with scepticism, and only data-supported conclusions should be taken seriously and acted upon. To do otherwise is to risk misunderstanding the true nature of ICT-mediated communications and their effects, risks, and benefits", wise words indeed.

I hope reading this did not distract you from an important task.



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