The Ten Commandments of E-mail
How to cope with e-mail overload and more
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It's Monday morning, and when you power up the PC you find 183 e-mail messages waiting for you — most of them marked urgent. Apparently other folks have no life and spend their weekends dumping work on your virtual desk. You're beginning to feel like you're the bottleneck in an information-flow conspiracy that's fast overwhelming you.

How do you cope? How do you sort out which among those e-mails can wait and which must be attended to? How do you learn what you need to learn — and forget what you can forget?

You've got a knowledge management problem. It's not that you don't have enough data; you have too much. And it's the same story everywhere: we're all awash in information and we feel like we don't have the time even to separate the good from the bad, let alone read and absorb it all. Let's deal with that e-mail problem by establishing some basic principles. We're going to cope with the overload by turning to the Ten Commandments — the e-mail commandments, that is.

1. Thou dost have several choices. Begin by performing triage. Scan the headers, and delete everything you don't need to know or act upon materially. The exceptions to this rule are messages from your kids at college or your closest relations anywhere, like your mother-in-law. Set those aside, virtually speaking, to read later. Now remember how e-mail works best. What most people, Bill Gates included, seem to forget, is that it's e-mail. It's really a modern form of something your great-grandparents enjoyed every day: the letter. It's best for short, informal messages that need to be both written and read. That's important, and people forget it constantly: don't say anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't want to commit to writing. Permanently. You may delete it, but if it makes someone else laugh or cry, or become furious, it will be saved. And read. Again and again. By people who say, "How could anyone have been so stupid as to write that?" A large number of e-mail messages should never be sent. Instead, they should be handled with a phone call. There's an old Arab saying, a form of salutation at the front of letters, that reads, "I have read and understood your letter, praise Allah!" The Arabs realized that the two were not automatically connected. The implication is clear: the possibilities of misinterpretation are many with the written form. Tone of voice, hesitations, silences, emotional outbursts — all of these can have important implications in communications, and they can only be communicated through the voice. If you find yourself worrying excessively over what to say in an e-mail, maybe you should call. Maybe you should write a letter — later, when you're calm. Maybe you should walk down the hall and talk to the person. Maybe, just maybe, you shouldn't even respond at all.

2. Thou shalt never print thy e-mail. If you have to print out your e-mail, it means that either you or the sender misunderstand the chief purpose of the medium. If you're sending documents around, in draft form, or for information, try to keep them in electronic form. Better yet, avoid sending documents at all. An enormous amount of time and energy is wasted in the corporate world by people struggling with incompatible formats, files that never arrived, attachments that got garbled or stripped off the message, or the like. Instead, post necessary files on an intranet, or an Internet site that people who need the information can be directed to. If your company doesn't have such a site, establish one. The time saved could launch another profitable division. Keep the e-mail medium for its best use: a substitute conversation, where the information being exchanged is not controversial.

3. Thou shalt never send e-mail when furious or exhausted. It's amazing how many people send e-mail that they live to regret. The old rule about writing letters that your great-grandmother knew still holds true for e-mail: write it down, save it, look at it tomorrow. Does it still look as clever or important as it did the night before? You may decide not to send it at all. The corporate world has thoroughly absorbed the strange lesson that it's good in most cases to overcommunicate. E-mail encourages this dangerous fallacy because of its ease of use. Fight this tendency by deciding to ignore all but the most essential information about time-sensitive events, activities, and plans. The truth is that all business communications should be action-centered. If a communication doesn't promise to lead to an action, consider not reading it or sending it. E-mail should be subjected to the same test.

4. Thou shalt never substitute e-mail for a necessary face-to-face meeting. When you're trying to persuade someone to do something, or someone wants to persuade you, there is no substitute for a face-to-face meeting. Never reprimand, reward, or fire someone who reports to you via e-mail. There's a special circle of hell awaiting those who do. We owe it to our humanity to perform these obligations, whether difficult or easy, in person.

5. Thou shalt never delete names from thy address book. It's astonishing how many people fail to take advantage of the time-saving devices most e-mail programs offer. Create standard headers and footers for your messages. Think how much time you'll spend otherwise simply typing your name over and over again. And other people's names: Keep an up-to-date address book. Never delete old names (until death do you part); you'll never know who will come back into your virtual life. In many companies, a little attention to design can improve not only the style of your e-mail, but also its readability.

6. Thou shalt never forward chain e-mail. One of the most tiresome activities legions of businesspeople engage in is sending e-mail humor that was created by a friend of a friend of a friend of the guy down the hall. The headers and footers on these monstrosities become endlessly long, and they clog up your system and slow down the reading of important e-mail. One particularly virulent form of this disease is the e-mail picture, where someone with more time than he should have has played with x's and o's on his screen until the result is faintly representative of some humorous image. Have you tried to open one of those files recently? Don't encourage this lazy form of communication. Eschew others who do.

7. Neither shalt thou pass on rumor or innuendo about real people. If you must gossip, confine it to people who are not real to you — movie stars, cartoon characters, historical figures. Avoid spreading false information about real, live people. It will come back to haunt you. Remember the Microsoft antitrust case: even your deleted e-mails can be resurrected and read in courtrooms by lawyers who are not friends of yours.

8. Neither shalt thou do so about companies thou workest for or may workest for one day. The relatively anonymous format of e-mail, and other electronic communication channels, tends to encourage the practice of flaming, whether of institutions or people. Use this simple test before you flame someone or something: Would you say it in person? If the answer is no, you should not send the communication — in any medium.

9. Thou shalt remember the hierarchy and keep it sacrosanct: First the meeting, then the phone call, then the voice mail, then the e-mail. In terms of impact and lasting significance, the wider the "bandwidth" involved in a communication, the better it is. Face-to-face meetings have the most interpersonal bandwidth. Phone calls lose the visual element, but keep the tonal qualities of the voice and allow for clarification and give-and-take. Voice mail keeps tone, but loses the chance to clarify misunderstandings. And e-mail has the narrowest bandwidth of all. Thus, it is the most dangerous medium. Use it with care. It's difficult to communicate successfully under the best of circumstances, and the narrower the bandwidth, the greater the possibility that something will go wrong or get fatally misunderstood.

10. Thou shalt send nothing over e-mail that must be error-free. It is simply impossible to proofread successfully on the computer screen. If a communication is important enough that it must be error-free, it should be sent via some other medium. If you feel you must send something via e-mail that has to be error-free, break the Second Commandment and print it out. Using a ruler, go over the document line by line. Read it once forward, for meaning and grammar, and once "backward," for spelling. The effort is time-consuming, but necessary if one hundred percent accuracy is essential.

Follow these Ten Commandments, and those 183 e-mail messages will melt away like ice cubes in the summer sun. And you will have e-mail righteousness, the glory of a clean virtual desk shall be yours, and all the cubicles will ring with your praise.

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