You are what you email @your inbox

... how do you manage your relationship with your inbox?

Cranfield Healthcare Management Group
Research Briefing 12

How do they manage?
a study of the realities of middle and front line management work in healthcare

Ciara Moore, June 2011
In 1971, the first test emails sent by Ray Tomlinson between two computers exchanged the forgettable message ‘qwertyuiop’. Little did the world know that this communication tool, with the advantage of instant messaging, would change how we conduct business to a much faster pace than we would have ever thought possible.

There is no denying the advantages of email. It is an essential part of how we conduct our business and it is engrained in our daily living. However, how does email affect NHS staff? Do we understand how to manage the stress of email, and how can we cope with the ever increasing volumes that land in the inbox, and still do the day job?

AOL conducted a survey in 2010 to find out the degree of addiction to email in America:

- 46% agree they are addicted to email
- 33% check email two or three times a day
- 62% check work email at the weekends
- 19% choose vacation spots with email access
- . . . . be warned . . . . 59% check their emails from the bathroom

We surveyed a multidisciplinary group of staff at Clearview Hospital to find out how they managed their inboxes. Clearview has over 7,000 employees. When we checked the number of live email accounts there was a total of 13,119 with 1,000 of those accounts inactive, and a further 1,000 generic or system accounts. A further 772 related to bank staff accounts of which some could be dormant for students who only work in the holidays. It was not possible to monitor internal email traffic, but over one week, the trust saw 204,344 incoming messages, and 229,148 outgoing messages. If we extrapolate just half of this figure across the 168 acute trusts in the UK, the NHS is potentially dealing with 3 million emails a week, or 18 million emails a year. Some of the key findings from the survey were:

- 63 - the average number of emails received per person per day
- 34 - the average number of emails sent per person per day
- 50% - constantly check their emails; the rest checked on average 8 times a day
How often you check your email may depend on your role. Managers and nurses with office days are likely to check emails more frequently. Consultants and nurses working on wards or in clinics need to schedule time for emails, or work late to catch up on their inbox.

*When in the office, email is on constantly, and as soon as I receive an alert, I have a quick look at what’s come in, even if I don’t deal with it immediately. I have tried working with email closed throughout the day, but cannot resist the urge to keep checking*

Clearview operational manager

A study in the use of email by staff at the Danwood Group (Jackson et al., 2001) found that interruptions from emails, while less disruptive than that of telephone calls, was more than expected: 70 per cent of emails were acted upon within 6 seconds, and once addressed, it took on average 64 seconds to resume working at the same rate before the interruption.

**EMAIL ALERT**

If a user sets their email to check every five minutes, they can have 96 interruptions a day if they are a heavy user. At Clearview, the average number of emails received a day is 63. If we assume the 64 second recovery, this means an average of one hour seven minutes of productive time is lost per person per eight hour day.

The affective aspects of emailing typically include feeling pressure to respond, despair, or being overwhelmed or feeling threatened by the content or tone of the email (Ramsay and Renaud, 2011). This can be especially true if managers use email to manage the team. One Clearview manager said:

*My manager emails me a lot, but doesn’t like receiving mails in return as her inbox is so full. She emails us all when something is wrong rather than catching us individually. It means everyone tries to work out who has committed the error that caused the email. I can see the reasoning of email but there must be better ways of pulling people up on errors.*

Clearview operational manager

Over 30 per cent of managers said that they did not manage their staff by email. But for some, with a 24 hour service, it was an essential tool for communicating with staff working shifts. They agreed that others manage by email, and for some it was considered, ‘as a measure of how many things they are involved in and they also bully by cc emails to the boss’. The culture of managing through emails for operational staff was thought to be due to the variety of work and the numbers of people involved, and was seen as a quicker way to converse and agree a way forward, though the opposite can also be true. Many staff accessed work emails at home: ‘I often end up sitting down at home with a cup of tea scanning down my mailbox in the evening. Having said that, I don’t feel I have control of my inbox’.

**Coping strategies**

Ramsay and Renaud (2011) found that many people feel overwhelmed and no longer in control due to the volume of emails. How can organizations and individuals manage the inbox more effectively? an individual or an organization manage the inbox more effectively? They identify a number of coping strategies and things to avoid:
No second guessing  Senders make your expectations clear and make it effective; you stand a better chance of getting a response if you send an email to one person

No obsessive checking  Respect different styles, but do not expect staff to monitor emails from home; remember, each email could cost you 64 seconds to refocus on your work

Ignore and delete  There is some risk to this but question the need to reply to CCs, request to be omitted if it is not necessary

Back covering  Sometimes this can be a necessary evil as long as it is recognized and managed, but should not be used for buck-passing

No buck passing  It is easier to dump a job by email; organizations and managers should educate their teams on how not to do this

Stop nagging  Stop the cyber harassment and send one well considered email rather than several related emails

People are hardwired to communicate. There is no substitute for meeting up personally

If you have a view on any these issues, please let us know.

Key sources


The research

This study is based on interviews and focus groups with middle and senior managers at six acute trusts and one primary care trust. The next stages of the project include a management survey, debriefing groups, and case studies exploring how changes are managed in the aftermath of serious incidents.

Participating trusts

Bedford Hospital NHS Trust  NHS Bedfordshire Primary Care Trust
Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust  North Bristol NHS Trust
Whipps Cross University Hospital NHS Trust

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