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Technology

Get Your E-mail Under Control

by *Martin B. Schneiderman*

Disney's landmark 1940 movie *Fantasia* is one of my all-time favorites. I think of the Sorcerer's Apprentice sequence every day.

That's the story of Mickey, the wayward apprentice, who uses his mentor's power to enlist the help of brooms to perform his chore of carrying water from the well. At first, everything goes wonderfully and Mickey takes a nap.

He awakens and is horrified to discover that the marching brooms keep multiplying endlessly and are completely out of control carrying zillions of overflowing buckets of water. Mickey fights for his life trying to keep his head above water in the torrents of the raging flood. Despite his efforts, his nightmarish situation keeps getting worse.

Every time I open my e-mail inbox I feel just like Mickey.

As a typical user, I receive about twice as many e-mail messages as I send each day. The growth in e-mail traffic has been documented in a recent Pitney Bowes study that showed U.S. workers in 1998 received 20 percent more e-mail than in 1997. I believe e-mail traffic will continue to increase.

In addition to the quantity problem, there's a quality problem. I'm particularly troubled by the growing proportion of irrelevant messages and junk e-mail (a.k.a. spam) that I get.

Until recently, my e-mail was out of control. No matter how quickly I responded to my inbox messages, new ones kept coming even faster. My personal productivity was suffering badly and I needed to do something about it. Since implementing the changes described below, I've managed to reduce my unwanted e-mail by about 75 percent and can now find and respond to messages much faster. You can do the same.

Ten Steps to E-mail Heaven

1. **Establish policies.** Establish, publish and enforce organizational policies for appropriate use of e-mail, including requiring meaningful content, when to use e-mail vs. other forms of communications, minimizing copy lists and preventing perpetual e-mail tag.

2. **Keep a low profile.** A good rule of thumb is to share your e-mail address as you would your personal phone number and extension. Don't reply to "remove messages" from junk mail senders—this is often a ploy to determine if your e-mail address is active. If you reply then you may get even more messages.

3. **Reconfigure your Web browser.** All popular browser software

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packages have a configuration option to store your e-mail address. Leave it blank. This prevents Web site tracking software from reading your e-mail address. You won't be able to automatically reply to Web e-mail links, but the tradeoff is worth it.

4. **Delete junk mail automatically.** Use your e-mail software's built-in rules and junk filters to automatically delete junk mail. Special e-mail blocking software can also automatically delete messages from identified sources.

5. **Get dropped from copy lists.** If you're consistently getting copies of unnecessary messages, then contact your listserv administrators or other senders and ask to be dropped from their lists. Review and prune your own distribution lists, too.

6. **Don't reply to all messages.** Resist e-mail's sense of urgency and demand for immediate answers.

7. **Reply using standard responses.** Use your software's "signature" capability to insert standard text responses.

8. **Be ruthless about deleting e-mail.** Keep only the messages that you really need.

9. **File messages in folders.** Store your "keepers" in logically named folders.

10. **Delete and archive old messages.** Configure your e-mail software to automatically purge deleted messages and sent mail after 60 days. Also be sure to archive stored messages on a regularly scheduled basis.

Martin B. Schneiderman is president of Information Age Associates, Inc., (www.iaa.com), a firm specializing in the design, management, and support of information systems for grantmakers and nonprofits. He can be reached at mbs@iaa.com.

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