Unveiling the Hidden Workload:
How Emails Masquerade as Tasks and Meetings

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In the digital age, email has become the linchpin of professional communication, serving as the conduit through which tasks are delegated, meetings are arranged, and a myriad of organisational decisions are made.

However, beneath the surface of what appears to be straightforward communication, lies a complex web of tasks and meetings that are cleverly disguised as emails.

This phenomenon has far-reaching implications for productivity, workplace stress, and the overall management of our daily workloads.

In fact, my previous article on '*The 7 Impacts of Email Overload on Psychological Health in the Workplace'* highlighted that these implications extend to issues of self-esteem, morale, work life balance and lack of trust within a department or entire organisation.

This article delves into the intricacies of how emails serve as trojan horses for tasks and meetings, the impact on professionals, and strategies for effectively managing this hidden workload.

The Email Deception: More Than Meets the Inbox

Emails, at first glance, seem to be efficient vehicles for exchanging information. However, they often contain implicit tasks and meeting requests that add to our cognitive load. For instance, an email that proposes a new project idea may implicitly require the recipient to schedule a series of planning meetings, draft project outlines, or solicit feedback from colleagues.

Similarly, what begins as a simple request for information can quickly balloon into a complex task involving research, compilation of data, and the creation of detailed reports.

The deceptive simplicity of emails masks the true depth and breadth of the tasks they impose. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors:

1. Implicit Expectations: Emails often carry unstated expectations regarding the scope of work and the timeframe for completion. A request for information, without clear parameters, can lead to extensive labour that was not explicitly agreed upon.

2. The Snowball Effect: A single email can set off a chain reaction, leading to an avalanche of subsequent emails, each requiring additional responses, tasks, and potentially even meetings to discuss the content of those emails.

3. Ambiguity and Misinterpretation: The lack of nuance in written communication can result in misunderstandings about the urgency and importance of the tasks being delegated, leading to prioritisation issues and misallocation of time and resources.

The Impact on Professionals

The hidden workload embedded in emails has significant repercussions for professionals, affecting their productivity, mental health, and overall job satisfaction.

- Increased Cognitive Load: The need to decipher and manage the tasks disguised within emails adds to the cognitive burden of employees, leading to decision fatigue and reduced mental bandwidth for core job functions. The constant sifting, sorting, prioritising and keeping track of email consumes enormous amounts of conscious and subconscious mental energy and headspace.

- Time Mismanagement: The disproportionate amount of time spent managing email-related tasks can encroach upon time that should be allocated for higher order strategic thinking, creative endeavours, and deep work, thus inhibiting innovation and efficiency. And for executives, the time they need to invest in leading and developing their people.

- Stress and Burnout: The perpetual cycle of responding to emails, coupled with the pressure to manage the tasks they conceal, can be a potent recipe for stress and burnout, eroding job satisfaction, employee morale and physical and mental well-being.

Strategies for Unmasking and Managing the Hidden Workload

To mitigate the impact of the covert tasks and meetings buried in emails, individuals and organisations can adopt several strategies aimed at enhancing email communication and workflow management.

1. Meetings vs Email Analysis: There are two primary ways to communicate – synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communications require all parties to be interacting at the same time. This mode includes face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and video conferences.

   Asynchronous communications allow senders to deliver their messages, and receivers to read them, when each is ready. This mode includes memos, text messages, voicemails, and, in ever increasing volumes, email.

   As Cal Newport has written in his recent article '*Should This Meeting Have Been an Email?*', the great advantage of asynchrony is its low logistical overhead. If you want to send information or ask a question, you can dash off an email as soon as you think of it, avoiding the endless phone tag or office corridor searches that might have been necessary in a previous era.

   The downside is that it can become all too easy to use in the moment. Digital messaging tools like email allow you to direct too many of your communications into haphazard threads of messages bouncing endlessly back and forth between inboxes.

   The great advantage of synchronous communication is its transmission efficiency. Real-time conversations are information rich, making it possible to convey large amounts of detail and complexity in a relatively short amount of time. A five-minute conversation can often accomplish the same as dozens of back-and-forth emails.

   The downside is that most of these synchronous interactions are scheduled in a meeting room or online via Zoom or Teams and the nature of digital calendars means that these will usually be allocated at least 30 minutes (even if that amount of time is not needed).

   As Newport writes, once aware of the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous communication, the question is how to leverage the information density of real-time interaction while avoiding the bloat induced by lots of thirty-minute meetings. Two solutions he suggests are.

A. Implement a strategy he calls Office Hours - a set period of time each day during which you'll be available for synchronous conversation: your door is open, phone on, Zoom room activated. When someone tries to initiate a back-and-forth conversation via email, direct them toward your next 'office hours'. They can then stop by for exactly the amount of time needed to reach a solution. I get some of my clients to call this SRT (Strategic Reserve Time) or GAM time (Got a Minute?).

B. If you work with a team, schedule several short 'stand up' team meetings per week. Maintain a shared document your team uses between these meetings to record any issues that need to be discussed. When you get to the next stand-up meeting, progress through these items one after another. This can save literally hundreds of distracting messages per week at the cost of only a small number of fixed calendar appointments.

So, before sending an email that could lead to extensive tasks or necessitate a meeting, consider whether a direct, synchronous conversation, either in person or via a call, could be more efficient. This can often circumvent the cascading effect of email tasks and the need for subsequent meetings.

2. Clarity and Concision in Email Communication: Organisations can provide training to encourage a culture of clear, concise, and direct email communication, emphasising the importance of clarity, prioritization, and the impact of email overload on colleagues.

   This involves explicitly stating the expected actions, deadlines, and priorities within the email subject line and message body, thereby reducing ambiguity and the need for back-and-forth clarification. This can foster a more mindful approach to sending emails. Establishing an agreed set of email etiquette and protocols can be done quickly at executive level and result in a prompt and significant reduction in unnecessary email volumes.

   A Harvard Business Review study of a London-based European management team showed that a training initiative showed a 54% reduction in email volumes amongst the 7 executives within just 3 months. This led to a reduction of 64% across the other 73 London-based employees, even though they received no direct training. The result was an annual gain of 10,400 man-hours, which translates to a 7% increase in productivity. The new practices soon became embedded in the top team's behaviour, and the reductions have been sustained for two years.

3. Inbox Organising Techniques: Employ an effective process to distinguish between emails that are purely informational versus those that require action. This can help in visualising the workload, prioritising tasks, and managing deadlines more effectively, outside the cluttered inbox environment. Email tasks should be moved to the Calendar which is a more effective tool for managing workload, timeframes and commitments, in one central and highly visible location.

   The Triage method is a proven and powerful way to consistently process the inbox, handling each email only once and working through them methodically from top to bottom, not scrolling up and down or cherry-picking emails at random. Every email requires one of just four possible decisions. It is called the 4D Methodology and the majority the time management experts over the past 20 years advocate this 4D method.

   The first of the 4Ds is to Delete. There are three sorts of emails we tend to delete - the obvious spam; the various newsletters, updates, reports, special offers etc we have unsubscribed to; and the legitimate but transactional emails that have now served their purpose and can be deleted.

The second decision is to Deal with the email straight away. This is where the powerful two-minute rule kicks in. If you can take the next action on an email in two minutes or less, it is quicker to do it right now instead of putting it off. This may not complete all that needs to be done with the email, but it moves it along at least one step, so the first touch of the email has not been wasted. I have written more about this in my previous article called *'The Importance of the First Touch When Using Email.'*

Interestingly, once the very next action is identified, it can often lead to taking 2, 3, 5 or more actions on that email, still within the 2 minutes. Research shows that 33-34% of email can be dealt with within 2 minutes.

The third decision is to Delegate. Somebody else needs to take the next action, so the email can be forwarded to somebody else with appropriate instructions or requests.

The fourth D is really interesting. There are emails for which you don't have the time, energy, or resources to process straight away. These account for about 35-40% of email. But you can capture the results of the thinking and decision-making when reading the email, the first time and allocate a priority, next action(s) and date/time you will come back to it, without having to read the email again from scratch later.

Once you have processed your inbox using this 4D method, you will have a distinct sense of peace and feeling in control without the mental clutter from a whole lot of unfinished business swirling around in the back of mind. This method will free up 15-20% of your headspace.

A recent case study showed that a one hour 'hands on' training session with the executive team of Canada's largest mining company saved 55 minutes per day or 4 ½ hours per week, with a dollar value of nearly $15,00 per person. Their inbox volumes, which ranged from 17,016 to 92,217 before the training, were reduced to single or double digits in less than a week after the training.

4. Scheduled Email Checks: Implement designated times for checking and responding to emails, rather than constant monitoring. Email checking should be done in a structured rather than unstructured way, with full rather than partial attention in a proactive rather than reactive approach.

   Once an email schedule has been established, all email alerts can be turned off, expectations around email response times can be established, with exceptions for time sensitive or urgent issues (better handled outside of email). This can help in reducing distractions and allocating focused time to work offline for deep work, without the incessant interruption of email notifications.

In Conclusion

The pervasiveness of email as a tool for workplace communication belies the complexity and volume of the tasks and meetings it conceals. Recognizing and addressing the hidden workload embedded within our inboxes is crucial for maintaining productivity, ensuring job satisfaction, and promoting a healthy work-life balance.

By adopting strategies that emphasize clarity, prioritization, and efficient communication, individuals and organizations can mitigate the challenges posed by this modern-day trojan horse, thereby unlocking higher levels of efficiency and employee well-being.

In doing so, we can transform our approach to email from one of passive acceptance to active management, reclaiming it as a powerful productivity tool to manage our workload and communications and free up our time, energy and focus for the work that truly matters.