

Death by a Thousand Emails

How distraction stifles “deep work”

by Maj Daniel C. Walker

It is subtly ironic that in an organization that so highly values appearance, spoken communication, and personal leadership, an impersonal electronic medium like email has garnered such an important place within the Marine Corps over the last decade. This technology, like many others, allows for near realtime access to those forces deployed globally, while at the same time enabling easy communications to those locally. Because of this ability to connect, email practices have an outsized impact on how our leaders schedule their days, task subordinates, lead Marines, and communicate with peers. However, despite the positive potential, current email practices within our institution stifle the cognitively-challenging work of solving big problems while minimizing the positive potential of such an electronic medium.

The ubiquitous nature of email results in the ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, all at a low marginal cost. Whether in an office space or on the road with a mobile device, a fleeting thought within one’s mind can be quickly and easily sent globally within mere seconds. Once that first email is launched, responses and then entire email chains can just as quickly follow. The result is a massive volume of email received by a vast number of staff officers within the Marine Corps. Though validated data is difficult to find specific to the Marine Corps’ email practices, my own anecdotal evidence suggests that it is common for many staff officers to receive 80 to 100, or more, emails per day. Corporate America experiences a similar deluge of emails with recent research stating that for many employees,

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more than 25 percent of a work day is spent managing email, while the average person checks his emails 70 times per day.¹

Many of these emails are not those in which many people are on the “To” or “CC” line, ensuring broad, concurrent visibility of an issue or potential solution. Unfortunately, the low cost of sending an email also resulted in the unparalleled use of that medium for one-on-one conversations. According to author Cal Newport:

The current social conventions surrounding email promote a conversational tone that clashes with the more systematic schedules or decision trees commonly used in process-centric communications.²

Additionally, the same types of conversations, which were previously held face-to-face or at least via phone to ensure complete understanding, have now migrated to a medium which is prone to misunderstanding because of the inherent lack of non-verbal communication.

These types of quick, often one-on-one, email conversations also produced an unstated expectation of immediate email responses. Consequently, because of this implicit expectation, more time is spent in the email browser leading to a perceived value in having additional conversations through that medium.



Email communications may be misinterpreted. (Photo by Cpl Christopher Johns.)

This “culture of connectivity,”³ allows for widespread, yet often shallow, information exchange with others.

Fundamentally, this problem lies not with the communications medium itself, but rather its role in driving how communication occurs within our organization. Over the last several years, similar discussions occurred within the military regarding PowerPoint’s role in conveying information. As former Gen James N. Mattis once remarked, “PowerPoint makes us stupid.”⁴ Many others complained that technology’s misuse stifled thoughtful discussion, critical thinking, debate, and cognitively-challenging work.⁵ The same complaints are made against email today, not because of its inherent inefficiency, but rather because of its misuse.

To some, this topic may seem mundane and inconsequential—who cares about the Marine Corps’ email practices? While on the surface, this discussion might appear to simply be an argument about which medium of communication is used throughout our organization, its implications are large and affect the capacity of our staffs—and in turn—the efficiency and effectiveness of our force as a whole.

In the February 2018 edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, 1stLt J.L. Currie and Matt Hartley published a timely and relevant article on the same issue. They effectively argued that current methods of communications—primarily via email and cell phone—are not in-line with our warfighting philosophy. They stated, “Unrestrained email and cell phone use eliminates the need for clear commander’s intent; it strips the decision-making power from subordinates.”⁶ Indeed, email practices have wide-ranging impacts to our institutional culture as well.

Despite the strength of that article, more must be said regarding email’s ability to stifle the capability and capacity to solve big, challenging problems—or “deep work.” According to author Cal Newport, “deep work” is defined as:

Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new

value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.⁷

Thus, email inefficiencies reduce the ability to perform such cognitively challenging tasks at work—continual email inflows create distractions not conducive to deep thinking; because of the large amount of time spent on email management, little time remains for analyzing and solving big problems.

For senior SNCOs and officers, the requirement for such deep work should be seen as inherent in one’s billet. While much of the day-to-day functioning of units is entrusted to the junior NCOs, SNCOs, and officers, senior leaders must have time available and an environment which supports this deep work. It is these same leaders who should not be thinking about email all day, and instead focus on writing or revising a

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campaign plan; determining how one’s unit can ingrain a culture of innovation within an organizational mindset; preparing and executing counseling with Marines; or conducting a lean six sigma-style process improvement project within one’s staff. This is the type of thinking we should not only expect from senior Marines—but demand. Unfortunately, this is often the type of work that is first to recede when a tide of email rises.

Cal Newport’s definition of “deep work” also makes the critical distinction that it is a skill that must be practiced frequently to maintain competency. Thus, because time for such cognitively-challenging tasks is rarely allocated in the face of continual email, this skill is rarely practiced, and in turn, our leaders’ ability to perform such a skill is diminished. In other words, our institu-

tion cannot assume that many leaders will be able to easily transition from a manic, email-focused environment, to one characterized by long planning sessions analyzing complex problems when that requirement truly arises.

To have our leaders regularly practice cognitively-challenging work, our email practice must change to allow the creation of an environment in which email itself is no longer the focus. However, at the same time, we must not desire to transform our Marine Corps into an organization of Luddites; we must harness email as a powerful medium for communication while not allowing it to drive our schedules, leadership styles, and organizational culture. Given the status quo, what changes can be made to achieve the proper balance?

First, we must recognize that any change of email practices must begin at the highest-levels within the institution. Because email shapes commanders’ and senior staff officers’ own schedules and are a preferred communication method, an entire unit can feel the effect of leaders’ email practices. Only by removing the implicit pressure of immediate email responses from senior leaders will those other company and field grade officers begin to then better balance deep work with other daily communications requirements.

Secondly, individual Marines must break away from continually checking email during the day. One way to do this is to “batch” emails. “Email batching,” made popular by Tim Ferris, *The Four Hour Workweek*, (New York, NY: Harmony, December 2009), is quite simple—yet profound. The concept is that instead of leaving one’s email browser up the entire day and answering emails as they are received, one should deliberately schedule “email time” on a daily schedule and only read or send emails during this time. By blocking off two or three times in the day which is truly dedicated to email management, the remainder of the day is free for other vital staff functions such as meetings, writing, and planning.

Email batching also forces a re-assessment of one’s daily schedule, as well as a unit’s battle rhythm. Without the



We are tied to email throughout the day. (Photo by PFC Kasey Peacock.)

“convenience” of emailing at all times of the day and getting an immediate response, leaders must ensure that the proper forums are established for information sharing, coordination, planning, and decision making. This is more challenging than it sounds. As Cal Newport says, “It takes significantly more effort in carefully planning your workday, determining what you need from whom, and by when, not simply sending emails.”⁸ However, if done properly, the benefits are clear. On the individual level, having two to three “free” hours per day—that were previously used continually checking email—allows one to assess personal priorities. Once again, this is time that can now be spent on significant items like working on conceptual issues, planning future operations, and developing Marines for the long term, not dealing with the stray voltage associated with many emails today.

With a massive reduction in email traffic, key leaders will also be required to re-assess how tasking occurs within one’s unit. Previously, at Combat Logistics Regiment 2, we instituted a ban on all tasking emails to assigned battalions, except in cases in which the due-out/execution was less than 24 hours out. We also broadened what was considered “tasks” to include all requests for information, data calls, special meetings,

and training events that required attendance, and other types of non-routine battle rhythm events. What replaced it? A “daily tasking order” which was simply a word document that consolidated every single task/question/due-out from every regimental staff section, and then attached to an Automated Message Handling System message. Such a solution reduced the number of emails sent between the regimental headquarters and the assigned battalions, buying all staffs much needed time to conduct deep work.

The final way leaders can ensure optimal use of email is to simply assess the best method of communicating the desired information. Although email may seem to be the quickest method for communicating, depending on the type of information being transmitted and the audience, email may actually prove counterproductive. Making the communications medium a deliberate decision will force a choice regarding a face-to-face, phone conversation, letter of instruction, daily tasking order, or Automated Message Handling System message, depending on the needs at the time. Such an assessment will ensure an understanding that, depending on what information is being transmitted and the target audience, email may be a poor choice.⁹

In conclusion, our institution’s leaders are by definition required to think at a high level and solve difficult problems; this requirement for deep work also requires that we not get bogged down in the “small” thinking that can sometimes be exacerbated by current email practices. Though email is a tool for good if used appropriately, our leaders must ensure that it is used as intended. By limiting the distractions of email misuse, our leaders can solve our toughest problems and continue to develop that cognitive skill required for future success.

Notes

1. Paul A. Argenti, “Stop Letting Email Control Your Work Day,” (Online: *Harvard Business Review*, September 2017), available at <https://hbr.org>.
2. Cal Newport, *Deep Work*, (Independently published, November 2018).
3. Ibid.
4. Elisabeth Bumiller, “We Have Met The Enemy and He Is PowerPoint,” (Online: *The New York Times*, April 2010), available at <http://www.nytimes.com>.
5. Ibid.
6. 1stLts J.L. Currie and Matt Hartley, “Implementing Maneuver Warfare in Daily Operations,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2018).
7. *Deep Work*.
8. Cal Newport, “A Modest Proposal: Eliminate Email,” (Online: *Harvard Business Review*, February 2016), available at <https://hbr.org>.
9. “Stop Letting Email Control Your Work Day.”

