

# Prevent pollution

Sociology, Communication



All time-management courses boil down to one basic piece of advice: set priorities and allocate the bulk of your time to tasks that are crucial to meeting your goals. Minimize interruptions and spend big chunks of your time in productive and creative activity. Unfortunately, current information systems encourage the opposite approach, leading to an interrupt-driven workday and reduced productivity. Here are six steps to regaining control of your day: Don't check your email all the time. Set aside special breaks between bigger projects to handle email. Don't let email interrupt your projects, and don't let the computer dictate your priorities. Turn off your email program's " Biff" feature (the annoying bell or screen flash that notifies you every time an email message arrives). If you're using Microsoft Outlook, go to Tools > Options > Preferences > E-mail Options and uncheck " Display a notification message when new mail arrives." Don't use " reply to all" when responding to email. Abide by the good old " need to know" principle that's so beloved by the military and send follow-up messages only to those people who will actually benefit from the reply. Write informative subject lines for your email messages. Assume that the recipient is too busy to open messages with lame titles like " hi." Create a special email address for personal messages and newsletters. Only check this account once per day. (If you're geeky enough to master filtering, use filters to sort and prioritize your email. Unfortunately, this is currently too difficult for average users.) Write short. J. K. Rowling is not a good role model for email writers. Avoid IM (instant messaging) unless real-time interaction will truly add value to the communication. A one-minute interruption of your colleagues will cost them ten minutes of productivity as they reestablish their mental context and get

back into " flow." Only the most important messages are worth 1, 000 percent in overhead costs. What Companies Can Do At the corporate level, we need to implement four more steps: Answer common customer questions on your website using clear and concise language. This will save your customers a lot of time -- thus making you popular -- and will keep them from pestering you with time-consuming phone calls and emails. User test your intranet. Clean it up so that employees can find stuff faster, and make the intranet homepage their entry point for keeping up on company news and events. Don't circulate internal email to all employees; instead put the information on the intranet where people can find it when they need it. (This obviously assumes that you've fixed the intranet's usability.) Establish a company culture in which it's okay not to respond to email immediately. This frees employees from the pressure of incessantly checking email and lets them get more work done. As individuals and as organizations, we can all do our share both to cope with the existing information pollution and emit fewer new pollutants. Ignoring this problem will only make it worse every year. If we act now, we can get it under control.