<u>Five ways to manage your e-mails</u>

We live in an age where information has never been so readily available. In fact people these days are bombarded with information particularly from e-mails and it is actually causing considerable stress in our offices. When we consider what has changed in the modern world, the answer is probably nothing, it's just the speed and volume of whatever we're dealing with.

This information overload comes from all sources, particularly from e-mail and represents a much bigger challenge than we realise. Research has shown that one third of e-mail users get stressed by the heavy volume of e-mails they received. Often it is found that employees spend more time typing e-mails than talking to each other.

Here are five ways to improve your company's use of e-mail:

1. Consider e-mail free days

One of the common solutions talked about in helping to solve this issue of e-mail overload is the idea of a regular 'no email days' where no internal e-mails are allowed for an entire day. The idea is based on 3 key assumptions:

a.) That e-mail is too readily available and people send more e-mails than they need to.

b.) That e-mail is not always the best or only medium to communicate information, even if it may often be the most effective.

c.) That people need rules, either self or boss initiated, to change behaviour.

I think we would probably all agree with these assumptions, but this is not going to solve all of the problems. The whole e-mail use culture needs to be understood and changed within companies.

2. Discourage the "butt covering"

A culture has developed in business whereby staff believe that sending an e-mail is being seen to do something and is used to "cover their butt" if something goes wrong. This should be discouraged as it breads an air of mistrust and does nothing to improve staff relations.

It is often found that most of the unnecessary e-mail traffic that is generated in a business results from staff seeking to prevent blame falling on themselves, or the perception that this is the only way to get on in business. This breeds a culture of secrecy that can fundamentally damage the way a business operates. The development of a more open culture of discussion not blame can motivate staff and improve the business processes, which manifests itself in improved efficiency.

3. Introduce more face to face interaction

Many research documents have shown that staff were sending e-mails rather than talking face to face with someone. E-mail can be faceless and anonymous and can build barriers between people and there is no substitute for thrashing out ideas or problems with someone in person.

The use of cubicles or workstation dividers in offices does not help as it puts physical barriers between people. The use of more open plan layouts may create more space and improve your company's communication channels. If space dividers have to be used, keep them as low as possible and certainly ensure that staff can still see each other without having to get up.

4.) Reduce internal e-mail

We have all seen companies where members of staff send e-mails to colleagues who are just a small distance across the office from them, rather than actually speaking to them directly. When e-mail behaviour is tracked it is often the case that many people check their inbox as often as once every 90 seconds!!.

Consider using notice boards as a medium for informing staff about events or news. Try having a weekly update meeting with time for input by attendees as an alternative to block e-mailing across the office.

5.) Discourage the "reply" culture

Part of the stress e-mails cause is the self proliferation effect of having to respond immediately to every e-mail received. There almost seems to be pressure to have the last word every time even if a response is not necessary or productive.

Try to instill a culture of "more is less" when it comes to e-mail usage and encourage staff to ask themselves, every time they respond to an e-mail, "is it really adding to previous messages". Perhaps more thought or research should to go into a reply rather than feeling that you have to fire off a response within 30 seconds, because "that's what you do".

REMEMBER!!

You should put in place a formal e-mail policy which highlights the benefits and disadvantages of e-mail use, and explains the problems caused to other staff and the company, by excessive e-mail use. Companies that have experimented with e-mail free days have found that they have been a massive success, with benefits including increased performance, happier customers and quicker problem solving.