



## **INFORMATION (AND E-MAIL) OVERLOAD**

### **A KNOWLEDGE ABILITY WHITE PAPER**

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#### **TUNA - the e-mail problem that's eating YOU !**

We know SPAM - mass commercial e-mail from outside that clogs up our inbox. But alongside SPAM we're seeing something equally time-wasting and annoying, again named after a popular canned food.

TUNA: Totally Uninteresting News & Admin

TUNA is internal junk e-mail.

TUNA is: those e-mails from Corporate about a new VP appointed in a long-forgotten subsidiary the other side of the world; the riveting stuff from Facilities about booking a meeting room; the new list of stress-handling courses from Training; and the possibly well-intentioned but irrelevant "FYI"s sent by fellow employees.

Like external junk mail, TUNA wastes our time, camouflages important e-mails that we need to read, and takes up system resources.

Can we stamp out TUNA? Only by taking action. The problem won't cure itself. Send John Gundry ([gundry@knowab.co.uk](mailto:gundry@knowab.co.uk)) an e-mail to join the Campaign Against TUNA. If you can please describe the worst TUNA you've received. Remember it must be internally-sent Totally Uninteresting News & Admin.

Now read on . . . this isn't a new problem nor is it the only problem we experience with e-mail.

A 1997 study undertaken by The Institute For The Future with the Gallup Organization for Pitney Bowes Inc., titled "Managing Corporate Communications In The Information Age", showed office workers deluged by communications and technology.

The study of Fortune 1000 workers found that "today's corporate staffs are inundated with so many communications tools - fax, electronic mail, teleconferencing, postal mail, interoffice mail, voice mail - that sometime they don't know where to turn for the simplest tasks." The study found that the average manager in these companies was sending and receiving 178 documents a day through a variety of media. Press comments talk of a "message traffic jam" and "communications gridlock". It reports that "69% of Fortune 1000 companies do not have a communications policy to guide and support their employees ability to make decisions about communications tools."

Pitney Bowes have continued their survey every year since. It's findings are depressing. The 2000 survey confirms that in the three years since the original was written, overload has got worse. Organizations are still floundering about what to do about it.

In 2000 we had new data, this time linking e-mail to workplace stress in general. The Institute of Management surveyed 800 members and drew up a report of factors causing stress in the workplace. "Keeping up with e-mails" was ranked No.10 in a list of 18 prime sources of pressure. It significantly contributed to the No.1 pressure, "constant interruptions," and was reported as a source of stress by nearly one-quarter of the respondents.

Clearly there is a big problem with e-mail, and in our experience, four things stand out:

First, people usually don't know how to use e-mail responsibly. Too much is copied 'for information' or as replies to large distribution lists. Often, the reason is to make the sender look good. Whole departments are culprits: particularly corporate functions who swamp us with irrelevant messages. In our surveys of international companies, an average 20 - 25% of the e-mail that people receive is internally-sent TUNA (see above). The more e-mail people receive, however, the greater the proportion of TUNA.

Second, we've let the near-instantaneous speed of e-mail drive our own behavior. We need to impose our own, human pace, so we feel more in control and therefore less stressed.

Third, in a similar vein, do we really need to check our e-mail ten times a day, or respond like one of Pavlov's dogs when the "new mail" indicator comes up on the screen?

Finally, we need to recognize the difference between pushing information at people, though e-mail, and letting them pull it when they need it from databases and online conferences. We experience more information overload when information is pushed at us, because we're not in control.

To focus minds on getting a grip on the e-mail disease, we ask this simple question:

*"Why is it that senior management can establish policies for products, pay rates, security, ethics, travel, infrastructure, community relations, etc., but are unable to prevent employees receiving 100 e-mails a day, all sent internally?"*

To help organizations answer that question positively, in the context of a programme for improved e-mail competency, and stamping out TUNA, we have created a tailored consulting, education and communication service called **Beating E-Mail Stress**. It comes down hard on e-mail as the primary cause of information overload, work interruption, and personal stress in the electronic workplace.

We also offer a recommissioned version of our 1998 training class **Email Best Practices**. For 2008 we have incorporated our Overcoming Information Overload class to reflect the current situation of organisations drowning in email. For more information about this class, please download our [Email Best Practices brochure](#).

There is more about both these services on our [Tools Best Practices](#) page, or please send an [e-mail](#) stating your interest, organizational responsibilities and contact details.

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