First, some numbers: 12,500 and 17,500. These figures represent the quantities of e-mails I sent and received in 2004-05, my first year as a high school principal. Assuming it takes a minute to read or write a typical message, I spent some 500 hours of the school year — about 2½ hours per day — sitting at my computer doing e-mail. Is this normal? Is this what school administration is all about? Is this what we want it to be about?

Just to be clear: I’m an average consumer of technology, neither a zealot nor a Luddite when it comes to computers. Having used e-mail for more than a decade, I understand and embrace the fact that digital communication is integral to the functioning of most workplaces in the industrialized world. Nevertheless, I was utterly unprepared for the volume of e-mail flowing through my school, and I remain surprised by the degree to which school leadership revolves around the computer.

Am I just being naive? I don’t think so. While e-mail certainly played an important role in my former work as a teacher, department head, and summer school director, the volume of it was always manageable. My training in education and nonprofit management focused, as one might expect, on such topics as faculty evaluation, strategic planning, and school law. What I’ve missed, I see now, is exposure to some of the practical realities of managing a high school, and one of those realities is e-mail.

If my case is at all typical — and I suspect it is — it may be time to take stock of the role that e-mail is playing within school communities. Should administrators be spending hours each day at the computer? Are there hidden costs that come with the efficiency of e-mail communication? What is the effect of increasingly digital communication on personnel or on the ethos of a school? And what protocols or best practices should we adopt to address these concerns?

Probably everyone would agree that e-mail makes running an organization, including a school, easier. E-mail is a great tool for expediting the many operations and decisions that take place behind the scenes in any educational setting. The major advantages of e-mail seem to be: swift and efficient communication, better-informed decision making through improved consultation with stakeholders, and automatic archiving of correspondence.

Unquestionably, e-mail helps me stay organized by

E-mail: Boon or Bane for School Leaders?

E-mail offers the school administrator an efficient means of communication. But Mr. Glendinning points out some of the drawbacks of relying too heavily on electronic communication at the expense of face-to-face interaction.

By Matt Glendinning

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functioning as a dynamic to-do list. In keeping me abreast of a wide range of issues, e-mail allows me to swiftly sort questions (yes, no, or let's discuss it) and track issues that require further thought. The “Mark as Unread” command in Microsoft Office is a godsend, reminding me that I need to follow through on a specific message by highlighting it in boldface, as if I had never read it. The “Reply with Quote” setting saves time and energy by appending the entirety of an e-mail thread to every new message.

It's hard to imagine coordinating the many trips, special events, schedule changes, and meetings in a school without the benefit of digital communication.

As I said above, I'm no Luddite, so whenever I'm tempted to complain about the amount of e-mail I get, I think about the even greater number of meetings that would be required to accomplish the same tasks. Indeed, one ethnographic study, carried out before the advent of e-mail, found high school principals slogging through several hundred interactions in a typical day, two-thirds of which involved face-to-face conversations averaging only 2½ minutes each.¹ E-mail helps to impose a sense of order on this massive web of communication, and it has the added advantage of creating a digital record.

But I'm probably preaching to the choir here. These advantages will be obvious to schoolpeople.

What I'm concerned about are the unexpected consequences of our dependence on e-mail. Like many technologies, e-mail offers both advantages and disadvantages. While the former arguably outweigh the latter, administrators would do well to keep an eye on the unintended drawbacks of doing business through e-mail.

Some of these disadvantages are obvious, even infamous. Take mistakes, for example. Most of us have probably sent a message to the wrong person, something that is all too easy to do via e-mail. Our head of school and maintenance director share the same first name, and they get a chuckle when they receive each other's messages after I've been too hasty in addressing them. But such mistakes aren't always so harmless. And a similar problem arises with the too-quick use of the “Reply to All” button, in which a reply intended for an individual is mistakenly sent out to a whole group. Such errors can be seriously humiliating, or worse, for those involved.²

Another issue is monotony. That is, e-mail has a limited ability to convey tone, stress, and nuance. Thus it isn’t always the best medium for communication. Every workplace seems to have an employee who is known for using a textual code of escalating emphasis, e.g., bold for important, bold capitals for urgent, and even bold capitals in red for an absolute emergency. Such attempts at precise communication are often foiled by overuse and the lack of standards regarding what the levels of intensity actually mean. There is no getting around the fact that it takes effort to decipher the subtext of an e-mail message, and it remains very easy to misconstrue the tone.

More seriously, I’m finding that e-mail has subtle but insidious effects on the way I do my job. And most of these effects are related to the issue of time.

First, e-mail impinges on unstructured time that might be better spent interacting directly with students, colleagues, or parents. Every day, I face a choice between staying caught up on e-mail or being present in the halls, dropping in on classes, and attending athletic events. Striking a balance between such competing demands would be ideal, but too often what I perceive to be the more pressing need tips the scale in favor of e-mail. What am I missing as a result? The many informal encounters, conversations, and interactions that are the bedrock of healthy human relations, especially in schools.

The resulting irony is clear: even as e-mail keeps us in contact with a broadening range of people, it’s a solitary and isolating act and not a very satisfying way to spend the day. I fear that, the more we come to rely on e-mail, the less we will value interpersonal skills and direct talk, the less interest we will have in others, and the freer we will be to ignore them. This dehumanizing tendency is troubling in general and particularly
alarmıng for schools, where the quality of individual relationships is so critical to their mission and its success.³

Debashis Chatterjee, a professor of behavioral sciences at the Indian Institute of Management, cautions: "Relationships built through high-tech methods such as faxes and e-mail have their own advantages, because they standardize and economize on the cost and time of communication. But in this quest for standardization of communication procedures, leaders miss out on the uniqueness of old-fashioned human touch."⁴

The impersonal, indirect nature of e-mail makes it an ideal medium for communicating problems, complaints, or criticism. Some people dislike conflict and steer clear of confrontation if possible; others are generally reluctant to complain or "rock the boat." But offer a way to raise issues without the trouble or awkwardness of face-to-face conversation, and a proliferation of problem-oriented communication may result.

It can be good for an organization when problem-oriented communication proliferates, and e-mail clearly helps a school leader fulfill an important role as sounding board and troubleshooter. But it doesn’t take much for administrators to find their escalating involvement in details tiresome and even overwhelming. E-mail becomes downright unhealthy if it is overused for petty or trivial issues. The difficulty, of course, is that what’s trivial to one person is probably important to someone else. Efficient use of e-mail seems to depend on the ability to swiftly gauge the relative importance of an enormous range of issues.

E-mail affects our use of time in other ways. Consider the time lag between when a message is sent and when it’s answered. Most of the time, this time lag is no big deal; we rarely give it a second thought. But several noteworthy things are going on here. First, e-mail places the burden of advancing the correspondence entirely on the receiver, who may or may not have the time, interest, or expertise to provide an answer. Using e-mail effectively thus requires a sense of whether the recipient can be counted on to answer, along with a willingness to yield control over the time frame of the response. I was months into my job before I got used to the way the pace of my work as a principal fluctuates depending on what issues are on the e-mail docket and who is involved in the discussion.

Second, the time lag between sent mail and any replies received forces users into a distinctly staccato mode of thinking and communicating. Rather than address issues thoroughly and sequentially in face-to-face conversation, administrators just as often engage in simultaneous interrupted conversations through e-mail. Dealing with many issues at once is nothing new for school leaders; what is new is the time-delayed nature of the correspondence. E-mail requires administrators to be comfortable with a fragmented and discontinuous thought process and with a state of "suspended animation" with regard to a number of ongoing conversations. The resulting ambiguity — not knowing exactly where one stands in any given e-mail thread — can be a cause of anxiety.

In a recent issue of the New York Times Magazine, Clive Thompson investigated the effect computers are having in the workplace. In one study, Gloria Mark of the University of California, Irvine, studied office workers. She found that they were interrupted every 11 minutes, and their work therefore devolved into a series of short, three-minute tasks, such as answering e-mail. Once interrupted, it took 25 minutes on average for workers to return to their original tasks.⁵ In another study, Mary Czerwinski of Microsoft Research Labs found that computer users typically manage eight different windows simultaneously — e-mail, Internet, PowerPoint, spreadsheets, and so on — and they flip back and forth among them at the alarming rate of 20 seconds per page.⁶

Can the human brain keep up with the ability of computers to multitask? A recent psychiatric study conducted by Glenn Wilson of King’s College, London, suggests that, in addition to doziness, lethargy, and even loss of I.Q., e-mail use contributes to lack of focus.⁷ One aspect of the report rings particularly true with me: many of the 1,100 volunteers exhibited a compulsion to drop whatever they were doing in order to reply immediately to incoming messages. Such constant shifting of attention, according to Wilson, tires the brain and diminishes productivity.

Maybe this explains why I feel so wiped out at the end of the day. Try as I may to resist looking immediately at new messages, the truth of the matter is that many of them turn out to be responses to important questions from earlier in the day, and I want to get them settled. But here’s the problem, according to Thompson: “Computer-based interruptions fall into a sort of Heisenbergian uncertainty trap: it is difficult to know whether an e-mail message is worth interrupting your work for unless you open and read it — at which point you have, of course, interrupted yourself.”⁸

The resulting fragmentation and inefficiency are
exacerbated by the time needed to re-immerse oneself in an e-mail thread. Continuously turning back to e-mail also leaves a chaotic mess of papers and tasks half-finished on my desk. Normally, I count organization and an ability to sustain focus as personal assets in my work. So the more e-mail causes me to complete tasks in piecemeal and haphazard fashion, the less I feel I am tapping into my strengths.

Another of the major benefits of e-mail — facilitating discussion and decision making — also comes at a cost. And again, time is the culprit. If I return to my desk after several hours’ absence to find 50 new e-mail messages, can I really give them all the attention they deserve? Too often, when confronted by a huge backlog, I’m tempted to dive into the midst of a group thread with a mere “I agree,” rather than push myself to think deeply about the issues.

I worry that, even while keeping stakeholders more in touch, e-mail potentially restricts the scope of discussion. First, by prioritizing written over verbal communication, e-mail rewards those with good keyboarding skills. Both speed with the QWERTY layout and deftness in thinking and typing simultaneously are required. Moreover, reaching a quorum in a group e-mail discussion — i.e., having all the right players tuned in at the right time — is largely a matter of chance. The quality of the discussion — and ultimately of any resulting decision — is thus a factor of who participates and who has the time to write a well-reasoned response. E-mail’s main asset — its expediency — thus becomes its main liability; the more messages that get sent, the less time and care we can invest in them.

TIPS FOR MANAGING E-MAIL

Despite the concerns I’ve laid out here, I am confident that, on the whole, e-mail can bring more benefit than harm to a school or to any organization. The following list of suggestions, ranging from the prosaic to the philosophical, is intended to point the way toward healthy, constructive use of e-mail.

• The use of handheld wireless e-mail devices can be a double-edged sword. The good thing is that you’re reachable by e-mail at all times; the bad thing is that you’re reachable by e-mail at all times.

• Turn off the acoustical prompt alerting you to incoming e-mail messages. This will help combat the fragmentation of attention.

• Consider limiting the times at which you allow yourself to read e-mail. You might want to do so only at the beginning and end of each work day.

• Resist writing long e-mail responses. Messages requiring a complex answer merit a face-to-face conversation.

• Be cautious about making organizational policy via e-mail. It matters who hasn’t joined in the conversation. Perhaps better ideas might emerge from a face-to-face meeting?

• With group e-mails, it’s important to distinguish messages that require a response from those that do not. Good decisions with which you agree can be made without your individual contribution. If you need to reply, the “Arrange by Conversation” setting in Microsoft Office allows you to easily watch responses develop as you formulate your own reply.

• Encourage members of the school community to make use of the calendar features built into most e-mail applications. A program can identify times when all users are free in a split second, thus eliminating the exasperating series of group e-mails homing in on mutually free time.

• Most important, recognize that e-mail is auto-cata-lyzing. The volume of messages you receive is related to others’ perception of whether you will answer them. The more efficient you are in responding, the more colleagues will come to feel that e-mail is the best way to reach you. Thus you will receive even more messages. Recognize that you are partly in control of this cycle.

E-mail is a tool that can vastly increase the efficiency and productivity of school leaders. It can enable them to better orchestrate school operations and so improve student learning. But administrators must remain wary of the effect that extensive e-mail communication can have on the school community, and they need to work to promote a healthy, balanced e-mail culture in the school.

6. Ibid., p. 43.
8. Thompson, p. 42.