How to stop emails sucking the joy out of your work hours

There are two types of work we do every day. One is reactive, fast-paced, brain-dead work. Then there is the intentional, slow, effortful work. Most of us have responsibilities of both kinds. If you fail at the first, you look unresponsive. You look like a bad team player.

But you are in fact paid to do the second. You are paid to think, to create, to do the hard stuff. The danger is that you'll become so busy that you'll end up mindlessly pushing through a mountain of reactive tasks. You'll be lost in busyness.

What we need is to go beyond productivity hacks. It's not enough to put away your smartphone before going to bed. And if you have a personal assistant, don't ask them to clean your inbox. We need to stop the email craze.

And yes, some companies have figured this out. The answer is not to spin faster, but to slow down the wheel for everyone. You can step-reduce ad-hoc communications. You can avoid real-time coordination. You can build a system that lets people pull in information rather than being pushed. Here's how.

First, document more to talk less. This might sound strange at first. But the key to driving down email is to document already-answered questions. Document everything in the open. Everyone contributes to a common source. Add a search engine. People can then search for what they need themselves.

Can this work? The world's largest all-remote company already does it. Gitlab has some 1,300 employees working across 65 countries, but no physical office. Co-founder and CEO Sid Sijbrandij observed Gitlab "scaled by writing things down and recording things".

Second, eliminate multiple versions of information. In Sijbrandij's mind, the biggest benefit of "documentation first" is to ensure a "single source of truth". Gitlab has a centralised, online handbook. It's a repository on how everything is run. Anybody can update it or create a new page. After changes are made, the employee then raises a "merge request" by selecting other colleagues from the "reviewers" field. The reviewers ensure the content is technically correct.

Think about it. It's crowdsourcing best practices from everyone. What it does is to codify every piece of tacit know-how inside Gitlab and turn it into something easily transmissible.

So how big is Gitlab's handbook? It's more than 10,000 pages long and growing. People simply Google the guide for everything.

Third, make real-time collaboration shareable. Of course, there are always problems that you can't solve without real-time collaboration. There might be fewer at Gitlab, but they still exist. Employees jump on a video call if they can't resolve issues after going back and forth with their colleagues more than three times.

The problem with constant email is that it fragments our attention. Our brains do not multitask, neuroscientists tell us. There's only context switching, where we toggle between competing demands. Our inboxes are sucking the joy out of your working hours. We have to stop that.

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