Text 10

Company ban on email gives employees a break
The Washington Post, December 9th 2011

In case you were too busy catching up on email last week and missed the media interest in the news, the French company Atos will, over the next 18 months, ban internal email, as it phases out the tool for its employees. The company's CEO, Thierry Breton, said that because only about 10 percent of the messages his employees receive is worth their time, and because too many of his people spend hours every night sifting through the internal e-mail they get every day, he's getting rid of the stuff. Completely.
And this is not a small company where everyone is seated in offices down the hall from each other. Atos has more than 70,000 employees based in 42 countries and is Europe's largest IT services company. Still, that's not stopping Breton from instead pushing phone calls, face-to-face interactions, text and instant messages, and wiki-like software tools for employees in lieu of email. Email, says Breton, is a "pollutant" and "an instrument to shirk responsibility." He hasn't sent a work email in three years.
He's right, in some regard. We've all felt the perverse sense of accomplishment that comes from sending an email to someone with an introduction, a list of questions or a request for help. We feel like we've gotten something accomplished. We can move onto other things, even if nothing has actually gotten "done."
That's only one of email's many problems, of course. People inadvertently send the wrong signals in emails all the time, conveying one tone when they mean another. They write missives, copying in everyone on the planet so there's no way to be accused of not getting the word out on time. They hit the dreaded "reply all" when they shouldn't. And they clog up inboxes with messages that say nothing more than "Ok" or "Got it."
Email is also incredibly distracting. Studies have shown that every time you're alerted to a new email, it can take 64 seconds to get your head back on track with what you were doing. If the average person gets close to 100 emails a day, that's an hour and a half of the day wasted on refocusing on work.
But should leaders ban it outright? I don't think so. It does have a time and place, even if it's overused. When a complex set of instructions needs to be conveyed in quick fashion, few things work better. When someone's sending you a request for information you know will need to be reviewed by other people or read again at a later time, there are few things that can be more easily shared or readily referenced. Sure, wiki software can do these things, but for many employees, e-mail is simpler.
I applaud Breton for trying to do something that streamlines his employee's workloads. For most professionals working in today's knowledge economy, information overload has replaced safety concerns as the No. 1 issue that affects their working conditions. And yet, it gets woefully little attention. Most leaders just pile on more ways to add to the information deluge, issuing Blackberries and laptops so that their people can be always on, all the time.

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