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Back to Basics

The Challenge

It came from nowhere. It started small and was once restricted to work and a computer. Now it is a big – very big – part of our lives and accessible anywhere and everywhere, even the remotest part of our honeymoon holiday in Vietnam. And yet we would be very unusual if our organization had any kind of email etiquette. It would be surprising if we had received any real instruction at school or college on how to cope in **The World of the Digital Interrupt**. And we might instruct our children in their “Ps and Qs” but what guidance can we – *should we* – give in a world in which their social life, peer recognition and much academic work seems to revolve around the digital connection?

So let's start our conquest of email, which at its best is life enhancing and at its worst is soul destroying. Let's get back to basics in order to make sure we can **go home email free**.

The Detail

What's email good for?

At work, email is brilliant for fast, responsive around-the-globe connections. It's good for distributing facts and relaying anything structured, such as an agenda or a plan. It's good for summaries, checklists and preparation notes. It's good when you don't want to disturb a person now, require a full conversation from somebody or are seeking any kind of feedback. In essence, it's good for facts.

In our personal lives, it's great for connection, sharing plans and photos, and for making arrangements happen. And doing it now and on the move and across the world.

What's it not so good at?

At work, it's not easy to see the full story from an email, as you have to be prepared to write a novel to cover all the nuances: it is thus SO easy to be not understood. It's particularly tricky at handling feelings and emotion unless you are a Mills & Boon novelist. It's always there, it never goes away and it's never done. It's ALWAYS nagging. In essence it's poor on emotions and where things are not at all clear-cut.

At home, curiosity for the ping and/or the buzz can become an addiction, quick and easy communication can become the norm and can replace slow and deep. The fleeting experience and buzz of a Facebook posting can take us away from the most important of our

relationships and stop us spending decent time, for example, with one of our children.

Why and how is it screwing us up?

It's screwing us up because there is no absolute with email. One could easily argue the case to give up smoking or to moderate alcohol. But where's the line with the 'digital interrupt' (a term we will use to cover everything such as email, text, Twitter, Facebook interrupts)? No, it needs a bit of discretion, some intelligence and balance. Lose any one of the three and we get stressed, feel we have no life of our own and the value of our "real" job (which for few of us is *just* answering email) plummets. Putting it bluntly: it screws us up.

The Story

Jon works for an international company, which is based in the UK but he heads up the Netherlands operation. He and his family moved out there a couple of years ago. His personal motto: have Blackberry, will travel. In fact he has a Blackberry for work and an iPhone for personal family and friends. It is rare that one of the devices is not in one hand. In meeting rooms the machines sit on the table in front of him, blinking. In coffee shops they are shuffled as he starts another quest for email zero. His chiropractor has warned him that he is developing SPN or "Smart Phone Neck" caused by a tendency to stand, sit and work holding the neck permanently at the optimum viewing angle for the small screen. Sadly, though, not such a perfect angle for a healthy spine and thus his nervous system.

Jon is ambitious and doing well, but at a cost. His health is nowhere as good as it should be for a 32 year old. He always feels stressed. His relationship with his wife of eight years is severely strained and he feels he never has time in the evenings with his two young children. He knows much of it is to do with email. But what's to be done? The world revolves around it now?

Jon is a good guy: we're going to give him some serious help. He'll be back in Section 3.

The Q&A

Isn't it down to an organization to put in place some kind of "email etiquette"?

It's worth hoping. It's certainly worth lobbying. People do work in different ways, are at different stages in their lives and projects. However, probably some fundamentals such as no emails at the weekend are worth lobbying for. More later.

I'm willing to go with many of your ideas. In fact I want to make the changes you are detailing. But how on earth do I get my kids to stop staring at screens all the time?

More later. Much more later. But remember the power of example. However important you are, you do not need to answer email at meal times. If your children are young, start with the power of example e.g. no technology at the family meal.

The Solution

1. Get back to basics. Understand what it's good for. And what it's not.
2. It's down to you to get the changes you seek, but that's OK as that is 100% under your control.
3. There is a range of simple strategies and tactics to help you and you are going to pursue those now.