

Using Email Effectively

Bite-Sized Booklets™

**Big Ideas.
Small Portions.**

Table of Contents

Driven to the Brink..... 4

**Managing Email Better —
The Time Management Perspective..... 5**

1. Eliminate New Message Alerts and Put Technology to Work for You 6

2. Process Email in Batches Instead of Individually 6

3. Understand the Respective Value of Responding and Responsiveness 7

4. Stay Focused on Developing Talent 8

**Leveraging Email —
The Strategic Perspective 10**

1. Define a Personal Purpose and Vision..... 11

2. Lead from the Heart and Not the Keyboard..... 11

3. Be Present and Be Authentic 12

4. Slow Down to Speed Up..... 13

Summation 14

WHITE PAPER

AUTHORS

Paul H. Burton
Principal, QuietSpacing

Sean P. Murray
CEO, RealTime Performance

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul H. Burton, Principal, QuietSpacing, LLC.

Paul helps people meet the challenges of the modern workplace. He works with clients to regain control of their day, get more done, and enjoy greater career and personal success. When not delivering presentations filled with time-making suggestions, Paul trains and coaches people on how to customize his revolutionary QuietSpacing® productivity method so that it fits into the way they like to work.

You can learn more about Paul and his practice at www.quietspacing.com.



Paul H. Burton
QuietSpacing
971.223.3663
paul@quietspacing.com
www.quietspacing.com

Sean P. Murray, CEO, RealTime Performance, Inc.

Before founding RealTime Performance in 1999, Sean worked for GE Capital at the Center for Learning & Organizational Excellence. In 2009, he co-authored the book *Getting More from Your Investment in Training: The 5A's Framework*. He also writes the RealTime Leadership blog and serves on the board of the nonprofit Education Northwest. Sean has an undergraduate degree from the University of Puget Sound and a master's of business administration from the University of Oregon.

You can learn more about Sean and his work at www.realtimeperformance.com.



Sean P. Murray
RealTime Performance
206.749.9000
seanm@realtimeperformance.com
www.realtimeperformance.com



An arctic tern on its way from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska will ignore a nice smelly herring offered from a bird-watcher's boat in Monterey Bay. Local gulls will dive voraciously for such handouts, while the tern flies on. Why? ... the tern resists distraction because it is driven at that moment by an instinctive sense of something we humans find admirable: larger purpose.—National Geographic article on great migrations, November 2010

Information overload and the narrowing attention span of the modern worker are considered new problems born of the technological changes of the past twenty years. And although it may be new to humans, the story of the arctic tern reminds us that this problem spans the eons. Evolution, through natural selection, has rewarded the arctic tern, which blocks out all distraction and stays focused on the long-term goal of arriving at its breeding grounds in Alaska, where food is plentiful and it can successfully mate and produce offspring.

As leadership coaches we have worked with hundreds of leaders over the last decade. These men and women are on the front lines of the exploding global business world. The playing field has grown larger, and the workday has expanded from eight hours to twenty-four. Yet these leaders have forged ahead without the benefit of a road map to guide them through this ever-changing landscape. The most dramatic change most of our clients face is the barrage of email, texts, phone calls, and other forms of contact that bombard them seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day.

Over time, we have witnessed effective leaders blocking out the distractions of the “smelly herrings” and staying focused on making progress toward their short-, medium- and long-term goals. We have also seen the opposite. We have watched capable, competent people drown in a sea of information and multitasking efforts, resulting in reduced productivity, lowered performance, and evaporating career satisfaction. This kind of technology-driven “activity trap”—the confusion between activity and productivity—can be devastating for

*...staying
focused on
making progress
toward their
short-, medium-
and long-term
goals.*

individuals and organizations on many levels. Not only do results suffer, but so does morale and personal well-being.

The bottom line is that today's leaders must adapt their behaviors to meet these modern-day time management challenges.

This white paper focuses on email as a productivity tool, and how it has changed the rules of the game, driving successful leaders to evolve new time management and leadership practices to achieve the objectives laid out before them. Along the way, we will share with you proven strategies for success in leveraging this powerful tool of the digital age.

First, we'll explore how email can either help us become better leaders or prevent us from achieving our goals. Then we'll share strategies for taking advantage of the power of this modern communication technology to make us better, more productive leaders while mitigating the negative side effects.

Driven to the Brink

The relentless flow of email more often than not engenders a sense of stress and anxiety in most people. The sight of hundreds of emails in our in-box can be overwhelming, even debilitating. Lacking an effective system for dealing with this constant flow, we can quickly lose control. In other words, instead of controlling our in-box, the in-box controls us.

Conversely, email has become a vital communication channel, delivering critical and timely information to our businesses. It has also made us more knowledgeable, productive, and efficient. The table below illustrates the dual nature of email and its twin abilities to both propel and destroy our productivity:

Email Enables ...	Positive Effect	Negative Effect
Immediate Communication	We quickly dispatch information and respond to customer needs.	Others expect near-instant response times, causing us to feel chained to our in-boxes.
Increasing Scope	Email and its brethren—texting, tweeting, and other Web 2.0 tools—give us the power to communicate inexpensively with a global audience.	We are increasingly the target of other people's mass communication.

Technology continues to change our lives as it has always done. The obstacles and opportunities listed above demonstrate that this change

The relentless flow of email more often than not engenders a sense of stress and anxiety in most people.

can have both positive and negative results. So how do we harness these technologies to help us achieve our goals at work and in life while minimizing the potentially harmful side effects?

Managing Email Better—The Time Management Perspective

Leaders must focus on two separate, but interrelated, elements to be considered effective: (a) the things that need to get done and (b) the people tasked with getting them done. Good leaders develop and apply good time management and workflow processing skills to part (a), getting things done. They develop and apply good people skills for part (b), working with the people available to accomplish the goals and tasks at hand.

Below is a list of recommendations centering on how effective leaders can better use their email to get more done. Each suggestion is followed by a short description of the topic. Following the list of suggestions is a detailed explanation of each topic.

Suggestions for Making Email More Operationally Effective

- 1. Eliminate New Message Alerts and Put Technology to Work for You.** New message alerts are self-inflicted and unnecessary interruptions throughout the day that reduce focus and, thereby, productivity.
- 2. Process Email in Batches Instead of Individually.** With the new message alerts turned off, check email periodically throughout the day, and process new messages in the same fashion you process regular mail—in batches.
- 3. Understand the Respective Value of Responding and Responsiveness.** Getting back to someone immediately only assures them that their message was delivered. Getting back to someone with a substantive response advances the subject at hand. Each has value, but responsiveness is where productivity lies.
- 4. Stay Focused on Developing Talent.** The most valuable time leaders spend is on developing their talent. This occurs in give-and-take environments, not quick answer missives. Looking for methods to educate and involve talent not only increases productivity, but engages the smart, capable people in the talent pool.

*Good leaders
develop
and apply
good time
management
and workflow
processing
skills.*

1. **Eliminate New Message Alerts and Put Technology to Work for You.**

The amount of time we spend each day in reactive mode versus reflective mode should not be dictated by the number of emails we receive. It's easy to succumb to the perceived exigencies delivered by our modern communication technologies. We become enslaved to these tools instead of commanding them. One simple but powerful step we can take immediately to regain the upper hand with our email and mobile device is to turn off the new message alerts. The fact that most people recoil at the notion of turning these off demonstrates how Pavlovian our behaviors have become. However, the few seconds it takes to glance away from the task at hand to attend to the alert quickly aggregate over the course of the day, becoming hours of lost time in the course of the year.

For example, let's assume that it takes only four seconds to look down at the alert, look back up, find our place, and begin working again. Assuming the national average of 99 emails received per day, we spend 396 seconds each day getting nothing done. (Note: What occurred was "activity" without any corresponding "productivity." In other words, there was movement involved but nothing got done.) That's about six and a half minutes a day. Multiplied over the course of the average work year, those six and a half minutes grow to more than twenty-four hours at work getting nothing done. To put a finer point on this, that's three eight-hour days spent at work that could have been spent elsewhere.

- ## 2. **Process Email in Batches Instead of Individually.**
- A complementary behavior to apply once the new message alerts are off is to process email the way regular mail has always been processed—in batches. More than 100 years ago, Henry Ford introduced the idea of batch processing to the manufacturing floor. More specifically, it is faster and more effective to conduct one isolated process at a time to complete a project than it is to regularly switch between processes to achieve the same result.

Processing postal mail has occurred this way virtually forever. Specifically, when mail arrives, we grab the stack, open each item, sort it, and then open the next item until we've worked our way through the day's mail. Then we get back to work, interleaving any new tasks that came in the mail.

This is *not* how we process email. Generally, we handle emails on an individual basis, opening them almost immediately upon their arrival. (This behavior is only exacerbated by the new message

*Henry Ford
introduced the
idea of batch
processing to the
manufacturing
floor.*

alerts!) This highly reactionary behavior is both inefficient and ineffective because our attention is cast hither and yon and our efforts are directed in short, sporadic bursts instead of long, focused beams.

The solution is to process emails in the same fashion we process postal mail—in batches. Of course, email needs to be batch-processed more than once a day, but the notion of working through a group of emails in one sitting is not that hard to initiate. How often the batches need to be processed depends both on the position you hold and the nature of each day you are working. The best practice is to start more regularly—say, every fifteen minutes—and stretch it out as you can, shooting for once an hour if possible. The net result is that you will process your email more efficiently while also remaining more effective regarding the exigencies of the day.

3. Understand the Respective Value of Responding and

Responsiveness. There is a crucial distinction between “responding” to someone and being “responsive” to someone. Responding is something we do to make the *other person* feel better. It’s an acknowledgment that we have received, seen, or heard something they are trying to communicate. In email, responding is often evidenced with a short reply such as “Got it,” “Okay,” or “Will do.” Fundamentally, we are acknowledging our receipt of their communiqué. Nothing has really gotten done; we have just engaged in more activity without any corresponding productivity!

Responsiveness, on the other hand, is a substantive communication. It is a productive effort with measurable results. The proverbial ball is moved down the field. Responsive communiqués come in many varieties, but a common introduction might read, “I’ve reviewed the materials you sent and I think ...” or “I’d like to move forward with your proposal. Please send me ...” A responsive email has a palpable sense of forward momentum. Something is getting done.

Each type of email—the Response and Responsive—has value, so it’s their application that becomes significant. Leaders should Respond to people when making the original sender feel better has value to both parties. For example, when dealing with a superior or a client/customer (especially a new client/customer), responding is appropriate. However, with email reliability approaching 99 percent today, an effective leader can suggest to those sending them email (including superiors and clients/customers) that

*The net
result is that
you will
process your
email more
efficiently.*

unless a bounce occurs, the sender can assume delivery. Another solution here is for the recipient to set up an auto-responder that acknowledges receipt and indicates that the email will receive attention in the ordinary course of business. (Note: For those who object to auto-responders on the grounds that they are impersonal or annoying, please reflect on the similar feelings we once had about voice mail and email early in their existence.)

Leaders should spend as much time in the day being Responsive to people as they can. This is where leadership time is most valuable—exercising field vision and moving the ball down the field. Email is a terrific tool for accomplishing this goal, so eliminating any wasted time in the day (especially from unnecessary acknowledgment-type behaviors) can greatly facilitate a leader's ability to be effective to those with whom they interact.

- 4. Stay Focused on Developing Talent.** One of the greatest advantages of email is also one of its greatest pitfalls. The ability to communicate quickly at literally any time of the day or night is hugely valuable when the content of the communiqué is responsive (see above). However, dashing off numerous missives and instructions without regard to whether the recipient's talents and skill sets are being leveraged can easily devolve into micromanagement. Once micromanagement has set in, it's very difficult to get subordinates to apply their own abilities because they become reactionary to the leader's behavior.

An effective way to avoid this pitfall is to rarely issue instructions to others via email unless the nature of the communication is truly a delegation of instructions. Specifically, when conversing with subordinates in email, take the time to facilitate their thinking and efforts in accomplishing the objectives being discussed. That is, don't answer every question asked. Rather, ask leading questions in return to their questions in a manner that provides a road map to the answer. An example of this is as follows:

Subordinate: "The X project deadline is next Thursday. Have you had a chance to review the options I sent you, and if so, which ones should we use?"

Leader as Manager: "Use options 1 and 4." Result: Subordinate has marching orders, but little application of their own skills and talents has occurred.

*Leaders
should spend
as much
time in the
day being
Responsive
to people as
they can.*

Leader as Talent Developer: “I’ve reviewed what you’ve sent. Which options do you feel will best accomplish the objectives of the X project?” Result: Subordinate is being asked to apply skills and talents. Ownership is being transferred from Leader to Subordinate, which further engages the Subordinate in this project and his or her job.

The second email takes a bit longer to craft and requires the leader to let go of the decision-making process and trust that their subordinate will exercise good judgment. However, the return on investment here is worth it. First, most leaders hire people they believe to be bright and capable. Behaving in a manner that communicates confidence in these beliefs (by asking for their opinion) instills a sense of ownership in the subordinate. The subordinate feels more engaged, and engaged employees perform at higher levels and, generally, stay in their positions longer.

Second, the underlying development that is occurring leads to subordinates who begin to propose solutions in the first communiqués instead of seeking a simple answer. When subordinates move beyond asking questions to proposing solutions, their talents and skills are, in fact, being leveraged in an effective and efficient manner.

A good rule of thumb for delegation is to do only that which no one else in the organization can do. In other words, get out of the weeds and spend your time where it is needed most. It is easy to get lost in the details. To effectively manage others in this new world we have to continually delegate and push decisions down in the organization, freeing up time to stay focused on the future and what is truly important. We recently worked with the executive director of a major nonprofit. She shared with us that she wakes up every morning and asks herself, “What can I do today that no one else in the organization can do?” What an excellent question! We wish more leaders would ask it. Unfortunately, the first thing many people do in the morning is check their email. They don’t have a chance to even ask the question because they are already in reactive mode. Don’t allow yourself to go there. Remember, you are in control of what you work on and how you spend your time.

Email is a powerful tool that, when properly applied, can facilitate the primary objectives of (a) ensuring that all that needs to get done gets done and (b) focusing the leader’s time and energies on the larger picture instead of micromanaging individuals and the tasks they are

... talents and skills are, in fact, being leveraged in an effective and efficient manner.

assigned. With this powerful technology applied more effectively and efficiently, we turn now to some suggestions for taking advantage of this tool more strategically as a leader.

Leveraging Email—The Strategic Perspective

Now that we have implemented the tactics above to more wisely and efficiently use email to get work done, we turn our attention to email's strategic implications. According to Basex Research, the average knowledge worker spends 28% of their day on unnecessary email and instant messaging. It is worthwhile to explore how to better use this medium to meet our strategic goals.

Leadership is about getting work done through the active participation of others and helping others achieve results they could not otherwise achieve. As we discussed earlier, new technologies such as email, social networking, and smartphones can positively or negatively affect our ability to successfully lead others, depending on how we use them. The following list of suggestions will help us become better leaders in the digital age.

Suggestions for Making Email More Strategically Effective

- 1. Define a Personal Purpose and Vision.** It helps to know where we are going. Without establishing this stake in the ground, we risk wasting the one resource none of us can afford to waste: time.
- 2. Lead from the Heart and Not the Keyboard—Connect People to Their Higher Purpose.** Although the keypad will always be used as a medium to communicate, great leaders understand that to get the best results we need to engage the hearts and minds of others.
- 3. Be Present and Be Authentic.** Even in the best of circumstances, it is difficult to truly listen to others and connect with them emotionally. In the modern office, with the daily barrage of digital information, it requires discipline and fortitude to block out distractions and engage in an authentic discussion.
- 4. Slow Down to Speed Up.** Remember, effective leadership is not about activity; it's about results. By incorporating the time management and leadership tips provided here, we will free up time and energy for activities that truly move us toward achieving the purpose of our lives.

*... it requires
discipline
and fortitude
to block out
distractions
and engage in
an authentic
discussion.*

- 1. Define a Personal Purpose and Vision.** The arctic tern is able to block out distractions because it knows its final destination and has the ability to stay focused on the journey. Effectively leading others requires us first to have a vision and purpose for our own career and life. The time management strategies we employ and the leadership behaviors we apply are all affected, to one degree or another, by this fundamental purpose. So, what is the ultimate destination for the time we have here on earth?

Although defining our purpose in life is one of the most important things we will ever do, surprisingly few people go through the reflection process necessary to truly come to terms with this question. The daunting nature of the challenge can be so overwhelming that people abandon the effort before they even get started, so here are some suggestions:

Don't try to answer this question on the fly; rather, engage in a deliberative process of reflection and inquiry. The effort is best achieved if we write down the thoughts we have during the process, if we consider the people most important to us, read biographies of the people we most respect, and identify the values and causes we consider most critical to our long-term success and happiness. We can also ask those we respect for their input and listen to our internal dialog—our hearts and consciences. Eventually, our purpose will emerge and serve as our “true north,” guiding us on our life's journey. With this purpose in hand, we can successfully avoid activity traps and stay focused on productive efforts that move us toward our purpose and vision.

- 2. Lead from the Heart and not the Keyboard – Connect People to Their Higher Purpose.** If we want employees who are passionate, engaged, and productive, we must help connect them to the mission and vision of our organization and to their own personal purpose. We must make the case for why the organization exists and how it is making the world a better place.

This isn't like a “go green” or a “sustainability” strategy. It is more fundamental than that. People want to believe in the organization they work for and see how their individual results contribute to its success. To truly be effective at

*Connect people
to their higher
purpose.*

connecting people to a higher purpose, we need to connect emotionally with employees, customers, suppliers, and all stakeholders. It requires constant communication through one-on-one conversations, storytelling, town hall meetings, webinars, and occasionally even email. It also requires listening to our customers and employees, and engaging in true dialogue.

What we tell leaders in our coaching sessions is “lead from the heart, not from the keyboard.” That doesn’t mean we don’t use email throughout the day. But we must take care not to allow our communications to devolve into an endless series of directives. It is our job as leaders to continually connect the activities being done to the overarching goals of the organization.

Email is great for reaching people quickly, responding to requests, and reaching a lot of people at once. But it is not good for connecting with people emotionally or dealing with sensitive issues that require nuance. When it comes to really connecting with people, there is no substitute for good old-fashioned live conversation. People want to see and hear a leader for themselves. They are seeking authentic people who demonstrate integrity and have their best interests at heart. Leaders are by definition leading people into the future toward a stated vision. We just can’t lead people via email. Yes, we can follow up with tasks, send information, and occasionally write a heartfelt reflective email on a recent success or failure. But the tendency today is to try to use this new tool to communicate messages that are incompatible with the medium. We predict it will take our culture many years to fully come to terms with this truth. True leaders can stay ahead of the curve by acknowledging it now and changing our behavior and communication patterns.

- 3. Be Present and Be Authentic.** Once we eliminate constant email interruptions, we are not just free to focus on critical tasks; we are also able to be more authentic. By transferring our attention from our in-box to the people around us, we are able to truly focus on our direct reports, colleagues, and clients/customers. When our minds are racing up and down a mental to-do list, skipping from one uncompleted task to the next in a whirl of anxiety, it is no wonder we can’t give

*... lead from
the heart,
not from the
keyboard.*

our direct reports any more than blank stares or rushed one-word answers. By controlling the email in-box we take back control of our mental focus.

We can take this newfound focus one step further. When a direct report or colleague comes by our desk to say hello or ask a question, we can take a deep breath, disengage from the task at hand, and focus our attention on them. Trying to multitask our way through the conversation by constantly checking to see if that important email has arrived sends the wrong message. It's ineffective. Remember, leadership is about getting work done through others, so this is an opportunity to shape your team's results.

Being authentic is about being natural, being ourselves. It is how we interact with others when we are free from fear and anxiety. Technology and our inability to control it is becoming a main driver of anxiety, preventing us from listening, exercising patience, and authentically engaging with others. Controlling our in-box allows us to invest time in our people and take the opportunity to show them our true colors.

- 4. Slow Down to Speed Up.** The time management suggestions above make us more productive. This frees up time for reflective activities such as exercising, writing in a journal, yoga, reading, meditation, or prayer. This is time to reconnect with our personal purpose, revisit our organizational mission and vision, and rebalance our priorities. It is also a good time to recognize and celebrate our daily progress toward our goals. By slowing down to connect with what is most important in our life, we'll find that progress toward our goals actually speeds up.

The biggest mistake we see leaders make is to define success as a specific point in the future when a business goal or personal milestone is achieved. Success is feeling every day that we have made progress toward our goals. Once we redefine success in this way, many of the activities we previously devalued become valuable. We'll also avoid many of the activities we instinctively committed to previously, because they simply are not critical to making progress toward our goals.

*Being
authentic is
about being
natural*

SUMMATION

The arctic tern's focus and commitment to its goal of reaching Alaska each year to feed and propagate has remained unchanged over the eons. Though changes on earth are constant, this animal has endured with a few simple behaviors—not succumbing to distraction and focusing on achieving the larger result.

Leaders today can learn much from this simple example. With all the change we encounter each year—economically, technologically, and personally—we must be mindful to develop enduring strategies and behaviors that ensure we achieve the goals we establish for ourselves. This article discusses email in particular because it has introduced some of the most significant challenges to the modern-day leader in terms of remaining responsive and effective from day to day. The suggestions contained here have proven themselves with numerous people in numerous situations. We encourage you to consider each of them to determine if they have a place in your leadership lexicon.



*...not
succumbing
to distraction
and focusing
on achieving
the larger
result.*