

Balancing Communication Overload and Effective Collaboration

Imagine the following scenario: You return to work after a blissful five-day vacation. You turn on your computer to find 471 new emails, 9 new meeting invitations, 15 new open tickets on your ticketing system, and 57 messages on your internal communication platform.

Most employees in large and medium organizations have experienced the problem of communication overload. We are constantly exposed to an ever increasing number of communications channels, each with an increasing volume of messages, demanding more and more of our work-time. Unfortunately, not all of these communications are relevant. In fact, recent research by Harvard scientists suggests that we live in a hyper-connected organizational environment that is characterized by communication overload, negatively impacting individual and organizational performance.

The reasons for communication overload are varied: teams are increasingly becoming cross-functional, organizations are becoming global and organizational silos are breaking down. All resulting in a need to improve collaboration within and between teams, across the organization and beyond organizational boundaries. Collaboration is essential to respond effectively to a rapidly changing through complex organizational structures. It is the availability of communication platforms and their ease of use that cause communication overload and suboptimal collaboration. The two most frequent tools for collaboration – emails and meetings - are also those that are most abused.

Emails: According to a recent report by McKinsey, emails have become the preferred communication channel in organizations. On average, employees receive 121 emails daily, each email "costing" the employee 90 seconds of "bounce back to work" time. These estimates can be considered conservative as email volume is expected to grow 3% annually, leading to a dramatic reduction in productivity annually. Yet, on average only 35 of the 121 daily emails are necessary and important – the rest can be considered "organizational noise". A recent study from the University of California, Irvine suggests that email overload and the over-abundance of organizational noise, increases employee's stress levels, resulting in higher burnout, disengagement and turnover.

Meetings: whether face-to-face or via electronic platforms, meetings are the second most frequently used channel of communication and collaboration. Conservative estimates suggest that they cost the American market \$37 billion dollars yearly. A study from the university of Arizona found that the typical meeting in corporate America involves an average of nine attendees and lasts 90 minutes. About half are recurring meetings. Yet 73% of attendees in meetings report being disengaged because irrelevance of the meeting to them. As a result, and perhaps not surprisingly, 47% of employees think meetings are the number one time-waster in the office. A culture of scheduled, recurring meetings that includes multiple participants, most of whom are not directly relevant to the issues at hand, is a time-waster leading to lost work-time, frustrated employees and lower organizational performance.

While emails and meetings are a leading cause of potential communication overload, they do not affect all

communication bottlenecks: they are more likely to become disengaged and have lower career satisfaction scores. Moreover, the same study shows that more than half of "extra-milers" go unnoticed by managers. HR professionals, as strategic partners, can greatly assist organizations in balancing the need to collaborate and communicate with the associated impacts through five steps.

1. Understand the extent of the communication overload problem, its sources and its targets. A first step in the solution is to receive and analyze data on the extent of time spent on different activities. How many e-mails are sent? How many of them propagate using mailing lists? How many of them are unreplied? How many are forwarded? How many meetings take place in our company? How many of them are recurring? What is the average number of attendees per meeting?
2. Identify problems that may lead to communication overload. Who are the employees or teams that are over-communicating relative to others in the organization? Who is under-communicating? Who are the employees who tend not to reply? Those who mainly forward messages to others? Who sends e-mails to multiple individuals? Are all the people who are invited to meetings actually critical in the follow-up email correspondences?
3. Ensure that key players who are essential for communication and collaboration are recognized. Identify individuals and teams who are critical to collaboration between and within units and provide them with relevant training to balance overload and provide recognition of their importance.
4. Redistribute work to alleviate communication overload. Examine how much work-time would be saved if certain meetings or mailing lists are cancelled. Examine what happens if certain individuals are not invited to meetings; what happens if higher role clarity is provided.
5. Set milestones and track changes over time to optimally balance communication volume and collaboration dynamics. Any intervention, whether through email and meeting training, restructuring or better role definitions should yield results that directly impact effective time spend on work. Provide upper management with ROI indicators as to how much time was saved as a result of implementing such changes.

StepAhead provides you the tools to identify communication overload within your organization, allowing managers to implement effective collaboration practices that drives productivity. It's time you know – and act – for a more effective work environment.