Remember the days when we actually posted a letter via “snail mail”? Those days are long gone and speed of communication is the new king. Sitting in the court of this new kingdom is e-mail. It has revolutionised communication, making it simpler and faster for businesses to communicate.

IT market researcher Radicatti predicts daily e-mails sent and received will hit 331 billion worldwide by 2009. Such huge volumes mean that e-mail consumes more and more of the average employee’s working day, with devastating implications for workplace productivity. Recent research by Emphasis reveals that senior staff in some of the UK’s Big Four Firms spend an average of £10,000 per person (A$25,000) annually on paying people to read and write e-mails.

So clearly we need to find ways of cutting down on e-mail traffic and managing it more efficiently.

Most of us have developed bad “e-mail etiquette” because of the sheer convenience of the medium and the fact that we haven’t taken time out to think about how we can control, rather than be controlled by this tool. Ingrained habits are difficult to change but the first thing in acquiring more productive habits is awareness. Consider the following seven deadly sins of e-mail and how to avoid them.

**Sin 1: e-mail addiction**

Bing! ...the noise alert, “you have mail”, has to be the greatest killer of productivity and concentration. Get rid of the e-mail alert and focus on one task at a time, especially when it requires thought and innovation. Check your e-mails at specific times throughout the day to enhance productivity and output. For example, only check e-mails at the start of your day, just before lunch and at the end of the day.

One in five people fall into the category of “e-mail dependant”, compulsively checking e-mail and panicking when they can’t get access.

**Sin 2: unnecessary “cc-ing” and CAPITAL LETTERS**

Needlessly long distribution lists are a major cause of the e-mail log jam. It may seem convenient for circulating a document to glean input from multiple people, but it can spark off an e-mail frenzy that you will find hard to cope with. There’s nothing like “e-mail noise” to raise your stress levels. Ten messages from ten recipients in ten minutes, with ten conflicting views.
Avoid typing your messages in all capital letters because IT LOOKS LIKE YOU’RE SHOUTING! Most people find this highly irritating. Using all lowercase letters is not viewed quite so disparagingly, but some e-mail users dislike this technique as much as all capitals.

**Sin 3: hiding from confrontation**

Don’t use e-mail as a medium to shy away from face-to-face confrontation. E-mail is best suited to simple communications, such as scheduling meetings and circulating minutes or updates. It isn’t a substitute for face-to-face or phone communications.

We’ve all heard the PR horror stories of bosses announcing redundancies by e-mail. A redundancy is never going to be good news, but receiving notification of it by e-mail just adds insult to injury. Likewise, appraisals or a request for a pay rise. It really doesn’t make sense to broach these subjects on e-mail. They are much better dealt with face-to-face, or at least with a personalised memo or letter.

**Sin 4: hitting “reply all” button by mistake**

Because e-mail is quick and viewed as a less formal medium than letters or memos, people can be careless in their eagerness to reply.

We’ve all seen this deadly sin in action. When a friend or colleague writes something about someone or something and accidentally copies in the entire distribution list. At the very least this will provide embarrassment, and at the worst jeopardise your career.

**Sin 5: verbosity or writing too many words, or not getting to the point, or too much information…**

A short and simple e-mail is more likely to get the recipient’s attention, rather than writing fifteen volumes of War and Peace.

- Better still, use bullet points to illustrate main topics, and
- Attach detailed documents that can be filed and retrieved offline

**Sin 6: think before you send**

This is the single most important caveat to remember when composing e-mail. Because it’s so simple and quick, it’s easy to respond without thinking a great deal about what you intend to say. Cool down. How many times have you blasted out an emotional e-mail on the keyboard and fired it off immediately, only to come back a few hours later and realise you have over-reacted?

As a simple rule, if you are going to send an emotional or “angry” e-mail, write it, store it in your draft folder, read it again a few hours later and then re-evaluate how you feel. E-mail may be convenient, but it’s also easy to misinterpret, lacking the visual clues or changes in tonality of face-to-face communication.

Always put a title in the Subject box to avoid the Junk Mail folder!
Sin 7: endless e-news
We all sign up to e-zines and e-newsletters thinking we’ll store the info and retrieve it when needed. Cut the clutter. Only sign up to e-newsletters that you think are going to make a difference to the way you work and live your life! Like this one:
www.andrewmay.com/newsletter (well you’ve gotta have a bit of a laugh, don’t you?).

If you currently receive e-newsletters you never read, unsubscribe! You’ve already got enough clutter in the In box without adding even more noise.

Final comment
There’s no doubt that e-mail can be a scourge on productivity and an added source of stress. Used inappropriately, it can even cause embarrassment and elicit unintended responses. But follow a few simple rules and apply a bit of self-discipline, and e-mail can live up to its promise of being a fast and efficient communication tool.

That’s it for now – gotta go – more e-mails to send!!

Andrew May

Main Reference Source:
Robert Ashton, Accountancy Age, September 2005