



HyperOffice
Collaboration Made Simple

Presents

WHITE PAPER

**FROM EMAIL BANKRUPTCY TO
BUSINESS PRODUCTIVITY**

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Executive Summary

Overfull email inboxes and a constant flood of unmanageable emails are facts of business life that nearly everyone faces. One is often tempted to file for “email bankruptcy” – click the delete inbox button and end it all. Most strategies around dealing with this email deluge relate to getting more power out of the email solution – greater storage, more intelligent spam filters, more powerful search – or better “management” of the email torrent – time budgeting, organization of mails etc.

This whitepaper argues that we’ve got the problem all wrong. If email deluge is a problem, we’re part of the problem. We are not using email for what it was meant for, what it was designed for. It is from this the problem of email chaos stems, as does the problem of constant distraction and productivity sapping email interruptions. Email is actually working against us.

The objective of technology, including email, is to enhance employee productivity and information management. The answer to overburdened email systems may be an online collaboration solution. Online collaboration tools allow you to focus on the work to be done rather than trying to force email into doing things it doesn't do well. This white paper describes how online collaboration tools not only help you reduce the email deluge, but also streamline information management and increase overall productivity.

Feel Like Filing for Email Bankruptcy?

Ever had a sense of drowning under a flood of email? Endless messages that come in waves faster than you can ever hope to deal with them - discussion threads in their nth lap, file attachments that need your edits or comments (again), tasks your boss asked you to finish, favors your colleagues have asked of you, meetings you're supposed to be a part of, newsletters you signed up for, never-ending personal messages, semi solicited sales messages, or spam that crept in in spite of all those spam filters? Feel like you're spending more time playing catch up with emails, rather than actually getting quality work done? Forever hounded by the nagging feeling that you missed something?

One possibility is to be drastic - go the way companies in dire straits go when they find it is no longer possible to pay creditors. Declare bankruptcy, get relieved of financial obligations, and start fresh with a clean slate. You could go the same way - throw your hands up, decide things are beyond all hope of recovery, and file for "email bankruptcy". Email bankruptcy was an expression coined by Wired author [Lawrence Lessig](#), who, unable to keep up with the constantly piling backlog in his inbox, decided to end it all, and deleted his inbox.

Sounds tempting?

Unfortunately, it is a tantalizing fantasy most of us can't afford to indulge. Like financial bankruptcy, "email bankruptcy" comes with great costs. You stand to lose critical business data hidden in the email mess - important messages, contacts, documents, tasks and other important things you can't even remember which are in there somewhere. And at best, "email bankruptcy" offers only temporary relief. Before you know it, the backlog is right back.

If it's any solace, you're not alone in your woes. Daily e-mail volume is now at 247 billion a day worldwide and increasing, as projected by The Radicati Group, a market research firm. To top that, there will be around 40 trillion spam e-mail messages delivered in 2009. A late 2007 Basex Research study estimated that businesses lose \$650 billion annually in productivity due to unnecessary e-mail interruptions. And the average number of corporate e-mails sent and received per person per day are expected to reach over 228 by 2010.

Worldwide E-mail Traffic

Messages Per Day

2008:	210 billion
2009:	247 billion
2010:	294 billion
2011:	349 billion
2012:	419 billion

The Radicati Group, 2008

Interruptions such as spam, other unnecessary e-mail and instant-messages take up 28% of the average knowledge worker's day. These interruptions account for up to 2.1 hours per worker per day.

Basex Research, December 2007

How Did We Get Here? - Defining the Problem

An important question to ask is – is this state of affairs inevitable? Is this increasing deluge of emails a result of business necessity, and something we can do nothing about? Or are we doing something wrong?

A simple exercise might help reveal the problem. Spend some time analyzing the nature of the emails in your inboxes. Find out how many emails fall in the following categories:-

- **Coordinating Schedules** – Deciding upon common times for meetings and events
- **Document Collaboration** – Working together on documents by sending them back and forth as attachments
- **Managing Tasks** – Sending or getting tasks requests and updating status.
- **Group Decisions** – Using email to discuss issues or as a voting mechanism to build consensus

You will find that close to half of the emails in our inbox don't have much to do with "communication" at all, and fall in one of the above categories. Ironically, email is supposed to be a tool for "asynchronous communication". A majority of emails are about teams and groups coordinating activities, discussing work related matters, or actually working on tasks like editing documents and sending them back and forth as attachments.

The Law of Meeting Coordination

The "[law of meeting coordination](#)" is a concept introduced by one of the authors (James Gaskin), in his recent article at [itworld.com](#). The law describes the relationship between the number of participants in an email conversation and the volume of emails generated through the equation $MV = P^2$. It is observed that email volume increases exponentially as the participants in an email conversation increase. Simple common sense

shows that email is ideally suited for one-to-one correspondence (one email evokes one response). Problems start when it is applied to one-to-many situations (one mail to n recipients evokes n potential responses in one cycle). When email really goes crazy, or leads to "email chaos" is when it is applied to many-to-many situations, which is typical of group collaboration (one mail evokes a potential of n squared responses!).

The Law of Meeting Coordination

$$MV = P^2$$

(Mail Volume = Participants Squared)

Email for Information Management

A major cause of email misuse is the blurring of the optimal purpose of email. In most business contexts, it is used for, well, just about anything. We're used to it; its right there in front of us, so why not use it if it provides immediate convenience – to store a file, to quickly get comments on a document, to ask a subordinate to accomplish a task? This reliance on email as a tool for information management is where problems start. Information of all kinds flows through and is crammed into the inbox in an ad hoc manner, and it is assumed that it will be retrievable when it is needed. Is it a wonder then that we spend a huge amount of times sifting, sorting and searching through mail, trying to find the right information.

Failed Email Management Techniques

Till now, all definitions of the problem of email overload have assumed that the torrent on incoming mail is an uncontrollable variable. Most approaches revolve around “management” of email influx, and feel helpless about actually controlling the torrent of emails. Some common approaches are:

Accommodate it All

With latest storage technologies allowing storage of greater and greater amounts of data more easily, one approach is to simply expand storage space in tandem with an ever increasing number of incoming emails. Gmail started this trend by offering vast storage capacity, which most users could never even come close to exhausting. Yahoo went a step further, and started offering unlimited storage to its users. The attitude simply is - bring on the email deluge, we can take it.

Better Search

Another variant of the above approach is to improve search capabilities of the email system. The vast sea of emails remains, but we find better ways to dive in and retrieve the mail we want. Gmail with its enhanced search capabilities endorses this approach, with its lightning quick search, and ability to “tag” emails for better searchability.



Yahoo's mascot for unlimited storage – an overweight kid who can't stop gorging on doughnuts - represents its approach to managing the email deluge. Evidently, this approach to email management is not “healthy”. If you relentlessly keep stuffing your inbox, sooner or later, something is going to give.

Image Courtesy Yahoo Inc.

Better Spam Filters

Another approach is to develop more intelligent spam filters, which ensure that only legitimate emails end up in your inbox. The question to be asked here is, how much of the problem is actually caused by spam?

The “Getting Things Done” Approach

Another approach is that of “managing your inbox better”. You can find endless articles online, each written by people who have devised individual strategies around better managing email deluge and maximizing productivity. The onus is on intelligently managing influx, and employing strict self discipline as regards how emails are dealt with. Some common tips are:-

Better managing your email time – Many email battered experts suggest the time you spend checking and responding to emails should be strictly managed. Turn notifications off and curb the obsessive compulsive urge to go check mail every ten minutes expecting a critical mail in your inbox. Strictly budget the time you spend on email overall, and on specific types of emails – newsletters, quick response emails, emails that call for elaborate replies etc.

Effectively Organizing your Email – The second strategy revolves around better categorizing and filing the emails you receive. Emails could be filed in “go through”, or “urgent”, or “doesn’t need attention right now” folders, which can be checked according to priority.

Subject Lines – Another solution is to modify and optimize the subject lines of emails so that you can easily search and retrieve them when the need arises.

The common thread in all the above approaches is that they’re fatalistic. There is no attempt to define the problem, or an attempt to seek out “how did we get here in the first place”. The problem has been accepted as a given – that we can’t get away from a sea of emails.

But with the ever swelling tide of emails, how long will it be before even the above approaches are completely rendered ineffective.

Misuse of Email – Move Collaboration Out of Your Inbox!

Much of the problem of email overload arises from making email do what it was never supposed to do. It is undoubtedly a great tool, until companies start forcibly using it as a “one size fit all” business communication and collaboration tool. That is when email actually starts working against us, rather than for us. Email, which is supposed to be a productivity tool, actually starts causing productivity losses as it becomes a constant distraction, and much time that could be spent doing productive work is spent digging through emails for information. Email overload is a symptom of a fundamentally flawed and disorganized strategy around information management.

Online Collaboration Software is the Way

Rather than cramming email as a one size fit all tool, a vastly more productive approach is to use online collaboration tools. Unlike the email approach, where all data is treated uniformly, and jammed inside the inbox, online collaboration tools appreciate that different information needs within an organization need different treatment – task management, document management, schedule coordination, and many others. When each type of information is handled optimally, it has a net positive effect on employee productivity and business efficiency. Recent studies have also supported online collaboration as a technology which will witness great growth. According to a March 2009 Forrester report on software-as-a-service, online collaboration is set to be one of the hotter areas of adoption. Forrester previously estimated the enterprise Web 2.0 collaboration market will hit \$1.8 billion by 2013.

"Online collaboration technology is becoming fundamentally critical to SMBs. It offers a huge upfront advantage that organizations seek in harsh economic times."

Roopam Jain,
Principal Analyst, Frost & Sullivan,
Oct 2008

Listed below are the different ways in which email is abused, and how online collaboration tools offer a much better solution:-

Coordinating Schedules via Email

Considering the importance of meetings in corporate life, a large chunk of business emails relate to a group of people trying to agree on a common time for a meeting, or trying to coordinate schedules for other purposes. It is not uncommon for a simple request to 4 people asking for a common meeting time to result in 16 mails back and forth, with everyone suggesting a suitable time according to their schedule, agreeing and re-agreeing, before a consensus is finally arrived at.

A Better Solution – Shared Calendars

An easy and logical solution to eliminate the deluge created by the above kind of emails is shared calendars. Shared calendaring systems allow everyone to maintain a personal calendar, and for groups to have group calendars. Rather than sending mail back and forth, a calendaring system allows you to easily (or automatically) check everyone's schedules, and suggest a common time suitable to all. Moreover, calendaring systems allow you to send out meeting invites directly to all participants, and manage reschedule requests from within the system itself. Rather than confusing themselves by following a string of emails, everyone can manage schedules from within the shared calendaring system.

Document Collaboration via Email

A majority of our emails contain file attachments, which we are supposed to edit, review, or give comments on. Using emails to collaborate on documents is a vastly inefficient method. Apart from creating network congestion because of the large files going around, our inboxes are also clogged because of the same file attachment going around multiple times as it is changed, reviewed, reedited, reverted, re-reviewed before the final document is arrived at. Moreover, this also creates the problem of multiple instances of the same document floating around on everybody's system, and it is not uncommon for a previous-to-final document version being sent out accidentally ultimately. Also, in case a situation necessitates that an older version of the document be retrieved, it means digging through a sea of emails to get the right version.

A Better Solution – Shared Documents

Shared document collaboration systems allow you to store and organize documents in a central online location where everyone can access them after going through a permission based access system. For document collaboration purposes, team members can log on to the system and edit, comment or review the document which needs their inputs. Since there is only a single instance of every document stored online, there is no problem of multiple versions floating around. Moreover, [document collaboration](#) features allow

better management of the collaboration process - audit trails help track who made changes, what changes were made, who reviewed them; document version control allows users to easily revert back to earlier versions, document comments allow participants to have discussion threads around each document.

Task Management via Email

Many emails in our inboxes relate to us being assigned an activity, a task or project by our manager, or responses on tasks we delegated. Hell breaks loose when it is more than a simple task, but a project involving multiple people, and a sequence of tasks involving deadlines or other constraints. It isn't a surprise that responsibilities get muddled, and deadlines are overshot. It is a project manager's nightmare to go sifting through endless mails to make sure multiple projects are on track.

A Better Solution – Shared Tasks

A shared task system is a system which allows project managers to streamline task assignment and track progress. It is a central place where managers can create tasks or projects, assign responsibilities to team members, sequence activities and create dependencies, and track progress. Team members can also use the system to update their progress and keep track of individual activities with "to-do lists" which tell them what they have finished, and what they have left outstanding. All team members can have a common view of where the project stands, and what everyone's contributions are. Built in features like graphic displays (Gantt charts, PERT/CPM charts) offer further assistance to everyone.

Group Discussions and Consensus Building via Email

Emails are also used by teams to discuss important matters, or to vote on issues. We are all used to discussion threads with an endless string of "REs" in their subject lines, and running on for what seems like miles. Also, once a discussion is over, it gets lost in everyone's inboxes as it gets older and older, along with the potential learning it might have held for the company in the future, or people who were not participants in the discussion, or those who join the company later. Discussion threads within emails do not contribute to the concept of "collective organizational learning" in the least. Voting through emails is another common practice, with the poor coordinator having to undertake the task of manually collating all the responses at the end. This is near impossible in the case of large groups.

A Better Solution – Discussion Forms and Online Surveys

Discussion forums are a central place where new discussion topics can be created and everyone can contribute their inputs to. Since it is a central place, everyone can easily see what everyone else is saying, as opposed to email discussions, where the emphasis is always more on the most recent input. This makes for discussions of better quality, and

better outcomes. Also, a discussion forum system also allows everyone to easily browse and search through older discussion threads to see if their problem has already been discussed. Thus a discussion forum also acts as a “knowledge database” for a company. Online voting systems allow companies to quickly create online polls where everyone just has to visit a web page and cast their vote virtually by checking one of the given options. This is a very easy and convenient and effective way to vote on everyday team decisions (what should we order for lunch today) or conduct extensive employee or customer satisfaction surveys.

It is obvious that all of the above group activities can be achieved by sending emails back and forth, but are vastly more efficient if done through dedicated “online collaboration” systems. Each of these systems is dedicated to a specific purpose, and devised to maximize productivity around that purpose. In contrast, stretching email to fit problems it was never meant to be a solution to, is bound to end up in productivity losses. And it is not as if these systems are divorced completely from email. Each has an inbuilt “notifications” system, and if the participants so choose, they are notified through email each time a change is made to the system. But the purpose of these emails is strictly “communication”, that is, to prompt the participant to go check the system, rather than each email creating n new emails in the system.

Some Online Collaboration Solutions

Microsoft Exchange

Microsoft Exchange can truly be seen as a near “complete” solution when it comes to satisfying the collaborative needs of an organization. In addition to helping manage email, it also includes a shared calendaring system, shared tasks, shared folders and discussion forums and voting. MS Outlook serves as the front end client for MS Exchange, which users can use to fulfill their email and collaborative needs.



The problem with Exchange however is, that it is more an enterprise tool than a small to medium sized business (SMB) tool. Its power is coupled with the need to set up dedicated servers, and hire dedicated staff to set it up and maintain it. The costs involved run into thousands of dollars, and are out of the reach of most SMBs. Moreover, Microsoft Exchange is more efficient as an internal solution. If a company seeks to coordinate schedules or jointly manage tasks with participants outside the company network – vendors, customers or partners – it requires elaborate implementation. Also, some of the features like discussion forms and voting are not included in the basic package in Microsoft Exchange, and are available to users only for an extra charge.

Gmail and Google Apps

Gmail and Google Apps are another powerful alternative available to businesses. Unlike Microsoft Exchange, Google's offerings are hosted and web based, well within the reach of SMBs. It also brings many pieces of the puzzle – email, shared calendars, and shared documents.



Image Courtesy – Google Inc.

An added benefit of Gmail is its powerful search capabilities, which are not present in most business email systems. Many business users employ the somewhat roundabout method of forwarding all their emails to Gmail, so that they can access its search features.

In spite of bringing robust capabilities, Google's solutions fall short of tackling all the causes of email deluge. Robust search capabilities allow you to better dig through the dirt, but the dirt, disorganized information management, remains. Google also misses some important pieces of the puzzle. It does not include discussion forums and polls, nor does it include a shared task management system.

HyperOffice Collaboration Suite

Although companies always have the option of purchasing their collaboration solutions piece meal, there are benefits of having them all within the same solution. HyperOffice Collaboration Suite brings all collaboration tools integrated in a single web accessible solution – email, shared calendars, shared document collaboration, task management, discussion forums and online surveys. Apart from the convenience of having all tools at the same place (you don't have to log in multiple times for different tools), free exchange of data between different tools creates synergies (users can attach documents to tasks, or if a meeting revolves around discussing a document, that document can be associated with the meeting's entry on the calendar).



Another benefit of HyperOffice is that it integrates with Microsoft Outlook, allowing business users to manage mail and all collaboration functions from within the familiar environment of Outlook. Although Microsoft Exchange allows the same features, its costs are prohibitive for SMBs, and HyperOffice offers a viable "[Microsoft Exchange alternative](#)", by charging a reasonable monthly fee, and saving companies the costs and hassles of having to set up dedicated servers and hire expert staff. Moreover, HyperOffice's software-as-a-service (SaaS), web based approach lets business users get started simply by signing up online.

Conclusion

The key is to make email work for you, rather than against you. Use email for the right things, rather than force it into purposes which are an ill fit. Email will still be used for corporate communication, which forms an important part of business life - sending out sales pitches, congratulating a boss on his promotion, receiving newsletters, or personal communication. Most outside parties will still communicate with you using email. But the deluge of mails created by internal collaboration will be a factor controllable by you. [Online collaboration software](#) is clearly the right answer. Online collaboration will also give you the option of drawing your partners and customers inside your collaborative loop. The result will be increased overall productivity, better relationships and a reduced urge to file for email bankruptcy.

More Resources

- [Live Webinar](#) – This webinar, presented by industry expert James Gaskin, discusses how you can use online collaboration technology to manage the email deluge, while improving workplace productivity.
- [Video](#) - From Email Bankruptcy to Business Productivity.
- [Presentation](#) - From Email Bankruptcy to Business Productivity.