

# Combating the time wasters

The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.

*William James*

Nothing is more annoying than... There is not anything half as distracting...

Nothing is more annoying than being interrupted except being interrupted unnecessarily – more than once. And, as you may have noticed, it just happened to me – twice. Interruptions can take many forms. People are behind many of them, in person at your elbow, on the telephone or shouting from afar. Also involved are emergencies, fire drills, computer malfunctions, visits to the stationery cupboard, accepting deliveries, lunch, coffee and what might be delicately called comfort breaks; all take up time, usually more than they reasonably should.

In the last chapter, clear and positive planning was advocated and yet (this was touched on) however sensible that sounds, however much you want to set a plan and follow it, things seem to conspire to make it impossible. I recall reading a survey somewhere that said that the average time a manager spent working uninterrupted was less than 15 minutes. Many will

endorse that all too easily. Interruptions and other time-wasting intrusions are endemic. You either collapse under the weight of them, becoming fatalistic and believing that they are inevitable and there is nothing that can be done to reduce them, or you go on the offensive. This may well be the most obvious example of the need not to let perfection be the enemy of the good, because you will always get some interruptions. But you can reduce their number; and, if you want to be effective at time management and reap the rewards, you must do so.

If you worked in a hermetically sealed room, safe and protected from the outside world, if you had no interactions with people and the telephone never rang, you would no doubt get a great deal more work done. But it would be a sterile environment and you would in many ways be less creative and less effective, because what you do in business draws strength from the various interactions and stimuli around you. And in any case, a sterile environment is simply not one of the options. So, the intention here is not to cut yourself off from the outside world completely or avoid legitimate interruptions, some of which can be positive. It is to minimise the real time wasters and replace some of them with more time-effective ways of achieving what we want.

## **The greatest time waster?**

So, we start by looking at three important aspects of one of the greatest time wasters, certainly the greatest procrastinator: you. This is an area of habit and of human nature that needs fighting (the right word, I think) for there are things here that we tend to return to again and again, with time being frittered away on every occasion:

1. **Do not put off the things you find difficult.** The time wasted here can occur in two ways. First, decision making is delayed, then implementation is delayed and both let

time leak away. Let us take a dramatic example. Imagine you manage a group of people, one of whom is performing badly. Action must be taken, and there are only ever three options here:

- put up with it (which is not to be recommended);
- develop or persuade the person to perform more effectively;
- dismiss the poor performer (or otherwise move them out).

The reasons for the poor performance may need checking, which can be difficult, so the temptation is to put it off – and time goes by. Or you decide that development of some sort is necessary and, if it is something you have to do, this is delayed – and time goes by. Or perhaps you decide it is a hopeless case and dismissal is the only solution. But no one really enjoys firing someone. It is difficult so you put it off, perhaps to try to think of the best way of doing it (there is no painless way). And throughout the entire process, the thought keeps coming to mind that ‘maybe it will get better’. This kind of thinking can be all too common and you can probably equate it with many difficult tasks you have had to tackle.

Now it seems to be a sad fact that difficult things do not get easier if they are left for a while. Worse, in many cases, what starts out as a bit difficult rapidly becomes very difficult if left and often breeds additional problems along the way. Think again of the aforementioned scenario. What are the costs of continuing poor performance if things are allowed to run? And what is the nature of them? In other words, how else will things become affected? For example, if the poor performer was a salesperson the cost can be measured in the revenue of lost sales but, depending on the nature of the poor performance, may also be counted in terms of lost customer goodwill, which might be even more costly in the long term.

So, do not put off the things, whatever they may be, large or small, that you find difficult. Of course, the thought, consideration, checking, or whatever needs to be done, must be done and in many contexts should not be skimped, but once you are able to make the decision or take the action, or both, then there is merit in doing so. Watch out for any tendency you have in this respect; controlling it can save considerable time and aggravation.

2. **Do not put off the things you do not like.** There is a difference between what you find difficult and what you simply do not like. The likely effect of delay and avoidance of tasks is very similar to that referred to above, and I will not give a similar example here, but the motivation is different, though not less powerful.

There may be numerous reasons for disliking doing something: it involves something else you do not like (perhaps something that necessitates a visit to a regional office, something that will take up a whole day and involves an awkward journey) or, more often, the dislike is minor – it is just a chore. This is perhaps the chief reason why administration is so often in arrears. It is boring and there are other things to do and... you know the feeling.

The only real help here is self-discipline and a conscious effort in planning what you do to make sure that such things do not get left out and that this, in turn, does not lead to worse problems. Some flagging system to highlight things on your list may act as a psychological prompt. Experiment here to see if it makes a difference.

If all this seems minor and you disbelieve the impact of this area, it is likely that any time log exercise you undertake will confirm the danger. Again, it seems simple, but the correct approach can save a worthwhile amount of time.

3. **Beware of your favourite tasks.** This is potentially even more time wasting than putting off things that you do not like or find difficult, and often the most difficult to accept. But many people spend a disproportionate amount of time

on the things they like doing best and, perhaps also, do best. This is perfectly natural and there are various reasons for it. An important one is that any concentration on what you like is what seems to produce the most job satisfaction. This is fine if that satisfaction comes simply from doing whatever it is and the thing itself is necessary, but the danger is that you may be prone to over-engineering, doing more than is necessary, putting in more time and sometimes producing a standard of quality or excellence that is just not necessary.

But there can be more sinister reasons for this practice. For example, it may be because you:

- are using one task to provide an excuse to delay or avoid others (the difficult things, perhaps), telling yourself, with seeming reason, that you are too busy to get to them;
- are concerned about delegating (a subject to which we return) and worry that a task is not a candidate for this, so you go on doing it yourself and go on over-engineering;
- find the work conditions of one thing too tempting, such as a low priority job that involves visiting an attractive city new to you, for instance – something that is compounded by the opposite being true of the priority task;
- find some aspect of possible over-engineering fun – spending hours devising, say, a graphic representation of some figures when something simpler would meet the case just as well;
- do not know how to go about something else and use the familiar as an excuse for delay or inappropriate delegation.

All these and more can cause problems in this way. It is frankly all too easy to do, we are all prone to it, probably all do it to some extent and thus all have to be constantly

on our guard against it. Usually it continues because it is easy not to be consciously aware that it is happening. The answer is to really look, and look honestly, as you review your tasks and your regular work plan for examples of this happening. Better still, look for examples of where it might happen and make sure that it does not. Of all the points in this book, I would rate this as in the top few best potential time savers for most people. Do not be blind to it – it is so easy to say, ‘But I don’t do that.’ Check it out and see how much time you save. And, who knows, maybe some of the extra things you can then fit in will become tomorrow’s favourite tasks.

Self-generated interruptions can be surprisingly time-consuming and are one of the surprises that often emerge from a personal time log. It is easy to be blind to them and, at the risk of being repetitive, it is logical to watch for these before the ones involving other people. Not that those are insignificant; read on.

## Handling personal interruptions

Organisations would be nothing without people. This is a pity in some ways, as you would otherwise certainly have a great deal more time. You cannot remove other people, but you can make attempts to control their unscheduled disruption of your work. Consider the effect first. Imagine someone sticks their head into your office and says, in those immortal words: ‘Do you have a minute?’ You may not know what it is about, but of one thing you can usually be absolutely certain: it will not take only a minute!

Interruptions may take any amount of time; you could find half the day disappearing on an unscheduled meeting. Now continue to imagine, let us say, that the visitor interrupts and takes up 15 minutes of your time. How long does that interruption last? Not 15 minutes, but just a little more as you have

to get yourself back into whatever work was interrupted and this may take a little time, and possibly still more time to get up to the peak of performance that you were working at previously. This effect is worth bearing in mind or you can be apt to underestimate the impact of interruptions. Time logs often show a significant loss of time in this way, as much as 25 per cent of total working time sometimes being affected.

Of course, some interruptions are in themselves useful. You want to have the discussions they involve, but not at that moment; on the other hand some are a complete waste of time. So how do you minimise them? There are essentially five responses:

1. **Refuse them.** Simple; you just say ‘no’ and send the person away. Sometimes it is that easy, it was not an important matter, it can be sorted without your help and does not crop up again. Alternatively, the person will contact you again at another time. Of course, it is more difficult if it is your boss rather than a colleague, but you can acquire a mutual respect for each other’s time in a working relationship. Then again, sometimes this route is simply not possible, whatever it is is simply too important and should take precedence, as with an unscheduled customer visit perhaps.
2. **Postpone it.** Say you cannot pause right now, but offer to fix a time for a discussion – or suggest one convenient to you – this still appears helpful and means you can choose when to pause. What is more, it is a technique that will make some interrupters go away with the response that it ‘doesn’t really matter’. Try this, you might be surprised how many never return.
3. **Minimise them.** Here you agree to pause, but you put a time limit on it – ‘I can let you have 10 minutes.’ If you do this, always stick to the time. In fact, by being disciplined in this way, you can create a reputation about your attitude to time and command respect, and this too will reduce interruptions a little.

4. **Prevent it.** In this case you need to instigate a system that provides some time guaranteed free of interruptions. You can plan and work this with a secretary, booking time for a job and treating it like an important meeting. But it can be simpler than that, and I know of cases where, even in an open plan office, people have agreed to respect a sign saying 'DO NOT DISTURB.' There is one proviso here: do not overuse this system. If you are never available, you will still finally get interruptions, or things you want to hear about will pass you by and something may go wrong as a result.
5. **Be somewhere else.** You may have the kind of job where you can choose where you work. People find a variety of, sometimes strange, places to repair to for a while to get the peace and quiet that improves productivity so much on some kinds of task. For example:
  - spending the first two hours of the day finishing that report at home before you come into the office;
  - visiting the public library reading room, a minute or two's walk from the office;
  - a nearby park (not with papers on a windy day);
  - for those who travel on business and sometimes have to stay in hotels, actually planning to take work along and stay on till checkout time rather than leaving first thing in the morning.

Some work on this book was carried out in a hotel in Singapore (when a training course was postponed). The only interruption during the entire time was the arrival of the next cold drink, but it was only possible because I never travel without having some work with me for such occasions – a good habit, I think, especially with work on a book of this particular title! Some ideas to reduce the number of drop-in visitors appear below.



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## Action to reduce the number of drop-in visitors

Some you want to see, some you do not, and many can be a complete waste of time. So, unless they are really useful or important (or a prime link in the grapevine) try some of the following to put them off:

- Insist on appointments whenever possible.
- Establish and publish 'do not disturb' times.
- Acknowledge them, but arrange another time to see them.
- Remember, it is easier not to start some discussions than to get out of them quickly (especially ones starting: 'I wonder if you could help?' Possibly, but should you? Or is there another way or time to help?).
- Brief your PA and/or other staff both to cope with more and to be firm where necessary.
- Use effective communications to reduce queries.
- Decide what needs to be originated in writing (though inappropriate memo writing can also be time wasting) and inform others.

And for the really awkward/difficult:

- Do not invite them to sit down.
- Set a time limit.
- Indicate an ending ('One more thing, then I must get on...').
- Initiate other action to make any drop-in unnecessary, including visiting them.

And, above all: say 'no', or even 'NO' more often. You can be firm without being (too) rude.

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## Handling telephone interruptions

Sometimes you want to be immediately accessible; on other occasions you can get a PA to act as a buffer, taking calls in the first instance and checking who is calling. Clear briefing can rapidly establish those you will pause for, those you will call back and those to forget.

If you take the call yourself you are at a considerable advantage compared with facing the head round your office door: the caller cannot see you, and there are many who do not regard saying they are busy, in a meeting, just leaving the office or similar statements as too much of a white lie. I even know someone who plays the noise of voices on a dictating machine to give callers the impression that a meeting really is going on! Just like physical interruptions, you can aim to avoid, postpone or minimise them, and additionally you may wish to devise special responses to particular kinds of call.

For example, how many calls do you get from salespeople in a week? Enough for it to be a distraction most would say. Some of them are useful, some you already do business with and want to maintain the contact. But others you need to get rid of quickly. Most of us are reasonably polite, and we do not like to be rude to people, but consider: only one minute spent on the telephone just to be polite, assuming you spend this with only three telesales people every week, is two-and-a-half hours in a year. And to save this time you still do not need to be rude. Find out at once what they are selling – then you can listen if you want – otherwise a neat sentence really early on will get rid of them fast: ‘Sorry, that would not be of interest and I am afraid I am too busy to speak now. Goodbye.’ Then put the phone down. You can always suggest another time to call back if you think a word with them would be useful. People know and understand, from their own experience, that the phone can be intrusive and tend to be more understanding of your not necessarily welcoming a call at a particular moment. Use this fact and save time.

All matters of handling these kinds of people interruptions require the normal people-handling skills: tact, diplomacy, but also suitable assertiveness. These need to be deployed in the right mix and to the appropriate degree. If you are seen as insensitive and assertive to the point of rudeness this may well be destructive of relationships. But if you effectively lie down and ask to be walked on, then it should be no surprise when you are treated like a doormat. The boxed text adds some suggestions for reducing call intrusion.

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## Action to reduce telephone interruptions

All sorts of calls can be problematical, some just because they interrupt, others because you do not want (or should not have to) deal with them anyway, still more because they last unnecessarily long or the person at the other end is a chatterbox. The following suggestions may help with some of the calls you wish to discourage, or prompt further ideas:

- Check the information on which the switchboard operator assigns calls, and rebrief if necessary.
- Brief your PA well if you have one.
- Ask a colleague to take calls for a period (you might swap time doing this).
- Create clear 'do not disturb' times.
- Use a voicemail system (though watch the negative side of this, for example the image presented to outsiders, especially customers).
- Specify to others when to call you ('Why not call me back between 2 and 3 o'clock?' 'Please ring before 10 o'clock, I will be tied up later in the morning...') whenever possible.
- Remember, delegation will direct calls to others on topics they will deal with in future.
- Give people the names of your personal assistant/secretary or others (many people, when told you are busy will simply call back, even if asked whether someone else can help. If you actually say: 'If I am not here then do talk to my secretary, I will make

- sure he/she knows about it... ', or similar, their reluctance to talk to someone else declines).
- Be aware of the time-wasting nature of social chatter and aim to curtail it before it gets out of hand (too much wastes time; none, and the world would be a less interesting place).
  - Set a time limit ('OK, tell me about it now, but will you keep it to 10 minutes as I have a visitor due soon.' People would much rather be set a limit than be cut off halfway through, so this need not seem rude).
  - Indicate the end is near, by using words like 'Finally... ', or 'Before I go... ', to make it clear to a caller you, at least, intend to stop soon.
  - Failing all else, be rude; or at least consider whether part of the problem may be that you are just too concerned to be polite (fitting in time when the phone rings can become a reflex: we say 'Sure...' rather as we answer 'Fine' when asked how we are, however we actually feel).
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Very important is the resolve and tenacity that you put into establishing approaches here. Some people seem conspicuously more successful than others at avoiding interruptions; if so they doubtless work at it. Precedents are easily set, for good or ill. There is a great deal to be gained by getting things right in this area and that includes ensuring you are seen in the right kind of way.

That said, there are other kinds of interruption and these too should be minimised. Bearing in mind (again) the cumulative impact of time savings, a few examples follow to conclude this chapter.

## Save time getting through

I can never quite come to terms with this one. It always seems unbelievable how much time is wasted dialling, redialling and holding on the telephone, much of it these days listening to

music and messages clearly designed to prompt insanity. What does make a real difference is a modern telephone (and maybe fax too). This is a form of digital technology I really warm to. They are not so complicated that they put you off and there are specific features that are real time savers. For example:

- If you have the ability to store all the common numbers you use this will save you having to dial them; a couple of digits and the phone does the rest.
- Many will also redial (for example, if the chosen number is busy first time) and some will go on and on dialling automatically until they get through.
- A loudspeaker means that if you have to hold on (listening to the music) then your hands are free and work can continue.

This is another, perhaps seemingly small, point that can make such a difference to your time. And each time you discover one the time saving adds up just a little more.

## **Make messages accurate**

Without a doubt, a vast amount of time must be wasted in offices around the world because of inaccurate or incomplete messages. Time is wasted:

- wondering what things are about;
- with things said once being repeated;
- with things having to be repeated or rephrased because of errors or breakdowns in communication.

There are bound to be times when you are away from the office, and even if such absences are brief or infrequent, a good message system will save you time and prevent possible misunderstandings, which can have other effects.

The information you want may not be exactly that on commercial stationery forms. You need a message form that is designed for you. In this way, it acts as a checklist for those around the office as to the information you want noted. Small differences here are important. For example, a section for ACTION TAKEN as well as ACTION REQUIRED tells you exactly how far a conversation proceeded and allows follow-up without repetition.

I believe such forms should be in a style that declares their importance – after all, one lost message may change history (or at least cause major corporate or personal inconvenience). You must decide what suits. Maybe an A4 size page is best (it means it can be clipped together with other papers to make a neat file as well as being more visible). Maybe it should be on coloured paper so that it stands out amongst other office paperwork.

All this helps; so too does clear briefing as to what should be dealt with, passed on, how quickly and in what circumstances. For example, do you want everything sent on to a conference you attend for a couple of days, or only certain things? What about people – who is told where you are and who not? And so on.

It is a waste of everyone's time if you pass back messages to the office or leave dealing with them till your return. So, decide what you want to know, how messages should be taken and when, where and how they should be passed on. It is one more small thing that adds a little more to good time utilisation.

## **E-mail**

This style of communication has rapidly become a major part of the variety of ways in which we all communicate. It is a major improvement. And if that makes you snort in anguish then you are not alone. Of course, e-mail is useful, but many abuse the system. It is so easy to send a copy to everyone in

sight (or rather out of sight) so that people are returning to their desks and finding, even after a brief absence, that a veritable avalanche of e-mails awaits. Some are likely to be as necessary as any letter, memo or fax, but they take some sorting. Mix in some spam and the sorting becomes even more substantial.

Everyone can benefit from everyone else's discipline in this area. Keep the volume under control and all benefit. A routine is necessary too; if you check your messages every five minutes, just in case you have received something interesting, any time advantage of e-mail quickly evaporates. The effects of all this are many and various. Sending a whole file down a special telephone line in a moment may well save time, but other impacts, as with any technologically-led change, may not be quite as we originally anticipate. Given the ubiquitous nature of e-mails, further information on their use appears as an appendix at the end of this chapter.

## On the move

Whatever travel means in your business life, whether you travel near or far or do so regularly, occasionally or often, it takes time. Some of that time can easily be wasted. Here we look at the essentials of time-efficient travel: first, whether to travel or not. What are the alternatives? You might consider:

- **Having people come to you.** This may be possible – you may only have to suggest it or it may even be worth footing the bill, providing an overnight hotel stay; this will cost no more than you travelling in the reverse direction, and saves you time.
- **Sending someone else.** Yes, even to that attractively located conference, delegation must always be considered and is commented on elsewhere.

- **Telephoning.** Some things really can be dealt with pretty simply and you do not need to be face to face, or an initial telephone contact gets something under way and a visit can come later when the project is less tentative and time spent on it more worthwhile. Note: mobile telephones – these seem to become more sophisticated as you watch, and it will doubtless only be a matter of time before one gadget strapped to your wrist will act as telephone, fax, generate e-mail and close the curtains in your living room while you sit in a restaurant on the other side of the world. Of course, mobile phones are invaluable for keeping in touch. They still need to be used carefully. Lengthy message-taking procedures when you are between phones may not facilitate good communication, and sometimes returning calls is delayed because some people are reluctant to call a mobile telephone because the cost is high. It is now possible to telephone someone thinking they are down the road from you and find your telephone bill reflects the fact that they were in Hong Kong. Some care is necessary still, perhaps, but – wherever you may be, they can minimise further travel.
- **Writing** (in whatever form – letter or e-mail). The same applies here as for the telephone, though the two forms of communication are different, one producing a written record. Remember, both may not generate such immediate or accurate understanding as a meeting.
- **Using technology.** For those able to afford it, modern telecommunications offer increasingly sophisticated possibilities, including telephone and videoconferencing where you can be linked electronically to a group of people all able to converse and even see each other.

So, before you call the travel agent, think for a moment. Of course some things can genuinely only be dealt with face to face and some journeys are essential – but not all. That said, when the journey is genuinely necessary, there are other considerations for those with an eye on maximising the effectiveness



of their time, not least timing. If you must go, consider the logistics:

- **Plan every trip.** Consider priorities, timing and how an absence fits in with other things.
- **Consider cost.** Different routes or ways of travel (train or plane, class of ticket) may affect not just cost but time – sometimes time saved may make it worth paying more.
- **Location.** What is the best place to meet, for example halfway between your location and that of whomever you are meeting?
- **What to take.** For example flying with no check-in baggage saves time, taking a computer may improve your productivity (see below).

With a journey organised, the next thing to consider is using travel time constructively. Certain tasks lend themselves to being done on the move. Here are some things that you can do:

- **Reading.** It is useful to catch up with all sorts of material, and easy to do as you go along; even a short journey may get a report or other document out of the way.
- **Writing.** This needs better conditions, but a good deal can be done (and dictating too, if you do not mind those around you hearing if you are on a plane, say – better for the car or taxi where there is some privacy).
- **Computer work,** which includes word processing. With modern equipment, you quickly get into the habit of doing this kind of work on the move and mentally pushing the surroundings into the background.
- **Discussion.** This is clearly only for when you travel with colleagues. If you do, there is no reason why you cannot schedule a proper meeting complete with agenda.
- **Telephoning.** Mobile phones allow you do a variety of things (see above).

- **Thinking.** This is particularly useful. You may need no papers, no equipment, only the intention and the plan to do so. I keep in my diary a list of ‘thinking things’, longer-term issues, specifically needing no papers, so that I can turn this up when suitable moments occur.

Match tasks to the particular journey. You can type more easily on a plane. On a train and in a car other things may be better suited. Hotel rooms, airport lounges and more all provide opportunities. It is worth some thought and the amount you can get done, even in adverse circumstances, may surprise you. Indeed, adverse circumstances can be an especially good opportunity: if you are marooned in an airport by fog, will you have the appropriate things with you?

Do not waste time contacting your office every five minutes while you are away to do no more than say, ‘Is everything okay?’ That wastes your time and that of others. On the other hand do make it clear what you must be told about, and do not forget the basics:

- Leave a note of all your contact details.
- Advise when you can be contacted and when not.
- Advise of any changes to your arrangements as you go along.
- Give an idea in advance of the workload you will bring back for others and the urgency of such tasks.
- Plan for emergencies. For example, leave copies of your passport, credit cards and such in the office – any disaster can then be coped with by a single phone call (but check your insurance too before you go!).

This is less an area of time saving than of making sure that time is not wasted because of lack of such details. Think also of anything that can more easily be done back at the office while you are away (even such things as spring cleaning it).

Although the areas of potential time saving are mounting up as this review progresses, and that is in itself useful, it must always be kept in mind why the time is needed. To do the tasks the job demands is too simplistic a way of putting this as, in most if not all jobs, some things are more important than others. In the next chapter we turn specifically to priorities – the first things first principle.

## Thinking about e-mail

E-mail, or rather unthinking use of it, can waste large amounts of time. What follows are some thoughts prompted by this fact – it is not designed to be ‘everything you need to know about using e-mail’.

First consider the level of formality involved. E-mail is usually much less formal than writing a letter. But having said this, the level of formality must be selected wisely. There are those to whom you may write very informally (incorporating minimal punctuation and as many abbreviations and grammatical shortcuts as you wish) as long as your meaning is clear. People replying to e-mails to do no more than check exactly what was meant must waste untold hours. But others (customers, senior colleagues) may resent this or think worse of you for it. Sometimes an e-mail must be as well-written as any important letter. It is safest to adopt a fairly formal style, and certainly a clear one, and err on the side of more rather than less formality if you are unsure. You have been warned! Proofreading is as important here as with many other documents; so too may be the use of the spellchecker.

*Note:* Computer viruses can arrive by e-mail, so don't consider it a waste of time to keep all antivirus software up to date and to use it correctly and regularly – failure to protect a system can result in big problems and may really teach you something about unproductive time. Similarly, personal use of

the organisation's e-mail can waste time and have legal and discipline implications.

## Some basic guidelines

As has been said, e-mails can be more informal than letters but certain standards as regards to style and content are sensible (again, some organisations set guidelines). Given the volume of e-mails people receive, you are competing for attention and must compose e-mails that are effective. An e-mail should be:

- brief – use plain words;
- direct – clear presentation, no ambiguity;
- logical – with a clear structure.

Whether e-mails are being sent internally or externally, as a substitute for a letter or not, it is important to ensure these rules are observed. A clear subject heading will make its purpose apparent and it may also be helpful to flag any (real!) urgency and say whether and when a reply is sought. Remember that e-mail can, like any communication, have many intentions – to inform or persuade etc – and may thus need as much thought to compose as any other document.

Before sending an e-mail, consider the following to ensure that it is presented effectively:

1. What is the **objective** or **purpose** of the e-mail? Do you know what you are trying to achieve? Is the e-mail a request for information? Are you circulating standard information? If the e-mail is a quick response to a query, make sure that what you say is correct. If you are unsure, explain that this is an acknowledgement of receipt, and that you will come back to the sender as soon as you can. If you do not know what the objective is, think carefully before sending your communication.

2. What is the **background** to the issue? Is the reason for sending the e-mail something that is to do with a problem in a project? Is there an explanation, excuse or apology required? Is it to elicit more information or to provide detailed answers to a query? For an e-mail to be clearly understood, there must be a reason behind it. If you don't know, check before clicking send.
3. Who is the intended **recipient**? Will it reach them direct, or will it be read by another person? E-mail in-boxes are not necessarily only seen by the person named in the e-mail address. It is possible that colleagues have access to a person's mailbox, for example when someone is sick or on holiday. It is important to bear this in mind when writing a message in case it may cause problems.
4. What **style** are you using? How is it being presented? Is the style really informal? Are you replying to a message which was half-encrypted with lots of missing capital letters, text-message style shortened words and emoticons etc? If so, that is fine. But think carefully about what impression the style of the e-mail gives to someone who is opening a communication from you for the first time.
5. What is the **content**? What is the e-mail saying and is it being clearly communicated without any vagueness and ambiguity? If the e-mail covers complex matters, it may be better to explain that a document follows. E-mails are usually intended to be read and understood quickly, so the content should reflect this.
6. Is there a **conclusion**, recommendation or response required? If so, is this obvious? It may be clearest to place any request for action at the end of the e-mail. Also by saying something like, 'It would be helpful if you could bring this information with you when we meet at 4pm', you will give the recipient a clear message that they have until 4pm to complete the task. Finishing off an e-mail with a direct instruction, or repeating the purpose of the message, will leave the reader in no doubt about what your intention is.

7. What (if any) **attachments** are being sent? Specify any attachments clearly. If a device is used to squash information together – such as zip files – it is always helpful to explain what system you use. If the attachments require certain software to open them, tell the recipient what is needed. This is particularly important where graphics and images are being sent. Some of these attachments can take ages to download and it is helpful to say so.

Conveying yourself appropriately in an e-mail is important, because it is instant and non-retrievable. As with other written communication, there is no tone of voice, facial expression, posture, body language and gestures to augment your message. As e-mail is a rapid and concise form of communication, the detail matters (see below).

## Best practice

These are some of the most important points of detail to remember when sending an e-mail:

- **Format.** Use an appropriate format or house style – this is often available as a template. Make sure it matches the style used in the company's letters and faxes and check what other aspects of layout are expected to conform.
- **Typography/font.** Most companies have a prescribed font and style but others can be chosen from the drop-down list in Outlook. The screen shot shows the font and size selected. You can also select the option to **bold**, underline and *italicise* words as you can in Word.
- **Subject.** Writer reference, case number or project name – this is just a polite way of ensuring that the recipient can save time by reading what the e-mail refers to. If you are sending an e-mail to someone about a particular matter, it is helpful if they understand immediately what the message is about.

- **Salutation.** Are you on first-name terms with the recipient? Do you need to write in a more formal style because you have not exchanged correspondence before? Do you know the name of the person to whom you are writing or would it be an impersonal salutation?
- **Punctuation.** Beware of ambiguity. A missing comma or no full stop can often cause confusion. It may be a lot quicker to lose capitals and miss out dots and dashes but if the reader is left puzzled by the meaning, you are less likely to get a useful exchange of information.
- **Line length.** Short sentences and line length make for easier reading on-screen. This is explained in more detail further on. Do not use complex sentences or syntax. Short and sweet is best.
- **Paragraphing.** Options are available from the drop-down list, including headings, bulleted and numbered lists. Paragraphing should be used where there is a change of topic or subject, so that the reader is aware that a new point is being introduced.
- **Consistency.** If the e-mail contains lists, take care. It is extremely irritating if the numbering changes in style or is inconsistent. If you are making several points, stick to a) b) c) or i, ii, iii or whatever style or format you prefer.
- **Valediction.** Unlike a formal letter you don't have to sign off 'yours faithfully' or 'yours sincerely', however in some cases it may be appropriate to end with an informal send off. Many people use 'kind regards', 'many thanks' and 'best wishes' or more impersonally, 'yours'.
- **Auto signature.** With e-mails it is possible to set up an auto signature as a default, which appears at the foot of each message you send. This includes your name and title as well as the details of the company you represent (such as address, switchboard number, fax and web address).
- **Attachment.** As mentioned before, these should be clearly described and mentioned in the text. If they are in different format, such as PDF files, it is a good idea to ensure beforehand that the recipient's computer is able to receive these files in readable form.

## Security issues

There are a number of issues here and again, failure to address them can be costly in both time and money.

### Time-wasting e-mails

This is an intractable problem, but some points are worth noting. Junk e-mails are a nuisance and can be time-consuming. E-mails received from reputable bodies sending legitimate commercial e-mail, as compared to 'illegal spammers', are within the law. The majority of illegal spam e-mails can be readily identified from the address and/or subject and immediately deleted without being opened.

Replying to illegal spam will often make things worse. The spammer will know that the e-mail address is valid, will continue to use it and will often circulate it to other spammers. Anti-spam filters have been mentioned and are incorporated in corporate IT systems as standard. They do not catch everything, but they certainly reduce the volume of spam reaching e-mail in-boxes.

It is possible to block some unwanted messages. There may be a number of reasons why e-mails need to be blocked from particular senders. Junk e-mails are just one of the main reasons; others include people with whom you no longer wish to correspond. By setting up barriers supplied with your e-mail package, specific e-mail addresses can be blocked. When a sender is blocked, their message will be diverted straight into the 'deleted Items' folder. Do not forget to empty this folder regularly, otherwise it can become clogged with unwanted messages. You can easily remove a sender from the 'blocked senders' list by selecting the address and clicking the 'remove' button.

Beware of opening messages from unidentifiable sources, particularly with attachments. These can contain viruses or micro-programs that can access your information and send it to others.



## Digital Signatures and other security devices

Several other things should be noted with regard to security:

- **Digital IDs** are being used more widely as an increasing number of people send information via e-mail. By using digital IDs or signatures you can ensure that no one is pretending to be you by sending false or misleading information under your name. Digital IDs in Outlook Express can prove your identity in electronic transactions, rather like producing your driving licence when you need to prove your identity. They can be used to encrypt (code) e-mails to keep the wrong people from reading them. Digital IDs are obtained from independent certification authorities whose websites contain a form which, when completed, contains your personal details, and instructions on installing the digital ID. This is used to identify e-mails and ensure security of your messages.
- **Encryption** is a special way to send sensitive information by e-mail. It is a form of electronic code. One code is used to encrypt the message and another code is used to decrypt it. One key is private, and the other is public. The public key is passed to whoever needs to use it, whether they are sending the message (in which case they would use it for encryption) or if they are receiving the e-mail (they would use it to decrypt the message).
- **Records** – some e-mail systems allow a note to be shown when an e-mail has been sent, received, opened and read by the recipient. This can be important in some time-critical instances, such as in finance, banking, law and property.

For all its advantages, e-mail needs careful use, not least in terms of time implications.