Burying Your E-Mail Message

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As the end of the semester rolled around at Norwich University, my special-topics students were busily sending their examining committees their final reports. One lad – let’s call him “Albert Baker” – noted that he was re-sending his report because one of his examiners mentioned that he hadn’t received it; the student apologized for possible duplicates.

I responded that I hadn’t seen it either.

An hour later, I opened an e-mail message from a sender I didn’t recognize; albert@biepald.com (all names and addresses have been changed to nonexistent ones). The topic was “C’est fini” or “it’s done” in French. I had left this message in my in-basket for some time because I always open messages with obvious subject lines and from people I know before dealing with reader correspondence, messages from strangers, or possible junk e-mail.

The mysterious message turned out to be from Albert and included the missing report. Had he sent it from his Norwich account, which would be bakera@norwich.edu, or at least included his real name, I would have opened it sooner. Had he used a meaningful subject line, such as “IS406 Final Report,” it wouldn’t have sat there unopened for so long.

This incident got me thinking about the current overload of e-mail that so many of us are suffering and what it means for effective use of this communications channel.

From a security standpoint, sending e-mail that doesn’t get opened is a breach of security: it violates the principle of utility. What’s the use of sending a message that gets ignored? Or at least, that gets ignored longer than it should? That slowdown could be viewed as a breach of availability of the message.

So here are some simple suggestions that you can circulate among your colleagues in your next newsletter to help improve the usefulness and timeliness of e-mail that matters – by which I mean e-mail that is work-related and needs a response:

1) Configure your e-mail client to include your real name, not a blank or a pseudonym. Your e-mail address can be anything you like; just be sure that you don’t send people e-mail whose only identifier is something like bob123@genericemail.net.

2) Use a meaningful subject line. Don’t be cute: “Something sweet for you” is more likely to be dumped in the spam/porn receptacle than opened in these days of swarming unwanted e-mail.

3) Don’t use the FORWARD or REPLY function of your e-mail to start a completely new topic. Especially if the topic you’ve been discussing is low priority and your subject line just continues using that string instead of indicating a new, more important topic, don’t be surprised if some of your recipients assign low priority to your new message, too. It can be disconcerting to open a message apparently discussing, say, “Refund policy for out-of-town expenses” and discover that
it’s actually dealing with what should have been labeled, “Emergency faculty meeting called for 15:00 today” – especially when you open the message the day after the meeting.

4) Be modest: not everything you say or find interesting is worth sending to everyone you know. Contrary to the apparent belief of some egoists, their colleagues do not in fact sing Sting’s “Every breath you take” song as they wait expectantly for the next “Me too” or “Yeah! Right on! You go, girl!” comment appended to 12 pages of copies of copies of copies of some two-week old message they’ve already seen 32 times. Send too much junk and all your mail will be relegated to the virtual dust bin.

This last point bears a little elaboration. At one point, someone in my University decided to send the entire faculty a “Thought for the Day” consisting of some cute quotation. Well, I pretty quickly added that person’s e-mail address to my “PLACE IN JUNK E-MAIL FOLDER” filter. Unfortunately, the same person was responsible for sending out faculty notices that really did matter, so I ended up having to check all this rubbish anyway. Someone must have complained, because the junk did eventually stop.

OK, now if this were junk e-mail, it would end “SEND THIS TO EVERYONE YOU KNOW!!!!”

But it isn’t (I hope).

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