Limiting E-mail Bottlenecks

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Sometimes I think that e-mail is a curse. When I look at my apparently inexhaustible list of pending e-mail messages, I feel like turning off my e-mail client for good. Ole Eichhorn, who has created a charming and idea-packed Website <http://w-uh.com/>, wrote an excellent overview in 2003 looking at the dangers of using e-mail badly. <http://w-uh.com/articles/030308-tyranny_of_email.html> He wrote, “There are two ways email impairs your productivity:
1. It breaks your concentration.
2. It misleads you into inefficient problem solving.”

Mr Eichhorn proposed “six rules for avoiding email tyranny:
1. Turn your email client off. Pick the moment at which you'll be interrupted.
2. Never criticize anyone in email, and avoid technical debates. Use face-to-face meetings or 'phone calls instead.
3. Be judicious in who you send email to, and who you copy on emails.
4. Observing some formality is important.
5. Don't hesitate to review and revise important emails.
6. Remember that email is a public and permanent record.”

My own rule for handling all interruptions depends on the central limit theorem (CLT) of statistics.<http://www.statisticalengineering.com/central_limit_theorem.htm> One of the implications of the CLT is that, in the absence of information about any given variable, the most likely value is the mean of its distribution. Therefore, unless you know something about the caller/sender or are expecting a specific message, a phone call or an e-mail message is most likely to be of average importance to you; it follows that if you are doing something of greater than average importance to yourself, do not answer the phone or read the e-mail. If your current activity is less than average in importance on your own scale, go ahead and answer or read as appropriate.

Another perspective on e-mail comes from an interesting white paper published by Permessa Corporation.<http://www.permessa.com/> In “Three Cs Of Email Management: Consolidation, Compliance, Cost Control: How to significantly lower both the operational and project-related costs of email”<http://www.permessa.com/media/whitepapers/3Cs_email_management.php>, the authors point out that despite the enormous growth in e-mail, “only 15% of received email is deemed truly critical by its recipients!” They recommend that organizations monitor e-mail traffic, identify the key misusers (or abusers) of corporate e-mail services, and devise and enforce effective e-mail policies to reduce abuse.

As a performance specialist for Hewlett-Packard operating systems and databases in the 1980s, I learned how important it is to identify the key contributors to performance problems, whether they be related to bandwidth hogging, processing overloads, main-memory contention, secondary storage limitations, or application bottlenecks. Showing where the bulk of the
performance-related resources are being consumed helps to establish priorities for optimization. For example, if a particular code sequence in a program consumes 1 millisecond (msec) of extra processing time but is repeated 2 million times per hour during normal processing, then the wasted time constitutes 56% of the total processing time! Even something as simple as reducing the wasted time per loop by, say, 0.25 msec would cut processing of the hour’s work by 500 seconds or 14%.

More on controlling e-mail in my next column.

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