

# E-mail: Stop the Insanity!

BY PAUL H. BURTON



As the creator of the QuietSpacing™ productivity method, **Paul H. Burton** works with individuals, groups and organizations to create more productive working environments. Learn more at [www.quietspacing.com](http://www.quietspacing.com).

It's time  
to for you  
to control  
your e-mail,  
instead of  
letting it  
control you.

E-mail has reduced us to the level of salivating dogs. Whether we are in the office, at home, or in line at the grocery store, we are obsessed with checking our e-mail. When was the last time you went 20 minutes without checking your e-mail – or without *thinking* about checking your e-mail – during a workday? My guess is that you can't recall. I know I can't.

I'm confident that the e-mail pioneers never thought we would have state and federal legislation that prevented us from checking our e-mail (among other things) while driving. Do we really need to be told that taking our eyes off the road while traveling 65 mph in a motor vehicle is dangerous? Really?

## THE GREAT ESCAPE

How can we escape the strangle-hold that electronic communication has on us? In my work with clients, we often linger on this love-hate relationship with e-mail. On one hand, it's a vital – and often effective – form of communication. On the other hand, it has created an expectation that people are *always* available and *always* responsive – a mindset that is nonsensical, yet it persists.

So how to manage the duality that e-mail has created? My typical response is that we need to release ourselves from its bondage and regain command of the tool. That's a decision every user must make. Once made, slight changes in the ways we manage e-mail are relatively easy to implement.

- **Settle on the Calendar or Tasks view.** Most productivity suites – such as Microsoft Outlook, Lotus Notes and Google Apps – provide a group of interrelated tools, with e-mail being one of them. There is usually also a Calendar and Tasks function in the suite, each of which has a separate screen or view. Because e-mail is a form of communication, I recommend that it be treated as such. Consider this: Very few people wait by the postal mailbox all day for letters and packages to arrive. Apply that principle to e-mail. I believe that the Calendar or Tasks view of your productivity suite is a far better place to spend your time – looking at your appointments or to-dos. Surely, you must check your e-mail regularly – maybe even a few times per hour – but there's no reason to hang out waiting with breathlessly for the next e-mail to arrive!
- **Minimize the screen.** Like settling on a different view, you also can minimize the screen altogether. This is no different than closing your office door when meeting with someone. The message is not to interrupt you right now because you're working on "X." Again, you can check your e-mail as often as truly necessary, but you don't have to open each and every one the minute it arrives.
- **Turn away from your screen.** Positioning your computer screen so you can turn away from it when you are working on other things – like paperwork – is a terrific way to reduce the distraction caused by new e-mails hitting your inbox. Of course, I don't need to tell you about turning off the new e-mail alert, right? But, then again, we did need that don't e-mail while driving legislation.
- **Turn off your monitor.** If all else fails, take matters literally into your own hands and turn the monitor off! This is also the "greenest" suggestion of the bunch as it uses less electricity.

## FINDING FREEDOM

When you decide that you control your e-mail instead of it controlling you, you free yourself of its grip on your psyche. After you've taken that first step, you can implement any of the suggestions above to realize immediate benefits from your choice. ✱