

## IT: Plugged in, wired up, stressed out

By Ottawa Business Journal Staff  
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Inbox envy.

It seems almost a badge of pride with some in the business community these days to loudly pronounce your daily e-mail tally to anyone who'll listen. Hundreds? Great. Thousands? Even better.

But does this kind of obsession with communications lead to better results at the bottom line – or is the opposite true? A growing contingent of IT specialists agree information overload – whether it be from e-mail, instant messaging, telephone or other means of communication – is a serious problem within the business and corporate community, and it's only getting worse.



Gord McCaskill, CEO of 4poyntz Design.  
(Darren Brown, OBJ)

The *OBJ* sat down with Gord McCaskill, CEO of 4 Poyntz Design (10 employees), to find out what he does when his employees get a bit too horn-happy.

OBJ: Perhaps first you could tell us what you do at your company, and how you've had to deal with so-called information overload in the past.

MCCASKILL: Well, 4Pointz Design is a marketing and communications firm. We have a signature product called Webpoyntz, and part of that is to promote communications over the web. So it provides the ease of manipulating content, gathering data, and doing something with that data through a variety of different forms. Within that, is sort of like a membership area for collaboration, and what we're trying to do is minimize the need for e-mail. Part of what some of our clients do is collaborate internationally, and they found that through legacy means – whether it's e-mail, or a Word document, or whatever – they were losing pieces of information. What we've done is gotten rid of the need to do that, and have everybody working online at the same time. So that's one of the things we're doing to try and limit information overload.

OBJ: So that's what your company does – are there any other, internal measures you take to streamline communications and limit overload?

MCCASKILL: About a year and a half ago, we provided some employees with a Blackberry – a lot of people who go out on the road. And I've found personally with my Blackberry, I save about two hours a day dealing with information as it comes in, as opposed to waiting, sitting down, and dealing with a lot of information at one time. So for me, it's a big time saver. It also allows us to communicate effectively with our clients and our partners, as the information comes in.

But the other side of that, however, is the overload component. So if you're trying to get something done and you get a series of important messages that come in, and you've got to deal with that, well then you've basically lost some time dealing with the subject at hand. Continuity plays a big factor in putting out something of quality, so when you're interrupted.... Well, you're interrupted.

OBJ: Do you have any personal techniques you use to avoid being swamped with messages?

MCCASKILL: There's no method that's implemented within the company, but for myself I try not to deal with my e-mail if I'm busy with something. I'm on the road a lot, so I'm not sitting behind a desk and I don't have to deal with that, in that sense. In the office, however, it's a completely different scenario – when you're in the office, my developers only look at their e-mail twice a day. But with my salespeople, it's completely different. I want them to have that quick response turnaround. So it's kind of dependant on what your job is, for you to deal

tomorrow. So it's kind of dependent on what your job is, for you to deal differently with your e-mail, or your phone messages, or any type of communication.

OBJ: What's your company situation in terms of wireless devices – are they fairly standard, or does only management use them, and what's your policy?

MCCASKILL: I've got one developer that's got a Blackberry, so he's always on and we can communicate and coordinate with that person. Each basic department head that doesn't need to be on the road had a Blackberry, and is part of that communication process. And my technicians who go out in the field are all carrying Blackberries, because they need to be in constant communication with the office, our clients, and with each other. So that provides a particular ease of communication with them.

OBJ: It does provide ease of communication, but how much does it contribute to employee information overload?

MCCASKILL: I can see it. I can see it in some of my employees, that they are overloaded with communications. When you look at how some of them respond and the time frames that they answer, you can see they've created their own, personal schedule to deal with e-mail. I have one technician who doesn't look at his Blackberry unless it's between noon and three, and that's a result of being overloaded. In the beginning, a lot of our responses were pretty fast, but you can see that because we were responding so quickly, people took advantage of that and expected it. So they've slowed it down and tapered it down a little bit, and to a degree they also screen their e-mails as to what's important.

OBJ: Ever have any instances of people e-mailing each other at three in the morning for work?

MCCASKILL: Oh my God, it's constant. Everybody's always on, and you'd be amazed at our e-mail history. We have emails going around 24 hours a day.

OBJ: Necessary emails? Or are they of the more frivolous kind at three in the morning?

MCCASKILL: There's really no frivolous e-mail in the company, maybe like one per cent or something very small. But I find the emails that people send at one, two, three, four o'clock in the morning are dealing with real issues. So with the development team, they're dreaming up new things, putting things together, looking for a response to see if it's a good idea, that kind of stuff. And if you look at our e-mails, I would say I don't know when anybody sleeps.

OBJ: Do you find you have to enforce a bit of a balance, though? It's good to have people so dedicated to their jobs, but do you have to say 'listen, take a break' once in a while, as well?

MCCASKILL: Yeah, I actually very now and again have to check out who's doing what, and what their stress level is like. And they may not know it, so you identify it and say 'You know, take a couple days off, go away and put your Blackberry down and get disconnected.' But we're very fortunate, we're a young company and everybody is passionate about what we do.

### **THE EXPERTS SAY...**

There seems to be almost a pride in having 3,000 messages in your inbox, or having to sit through a meeting and ignore everything everyone else is saying because you're using your Blackberry. I talked to a VP of human resources of a large corporation recently, and she estimated that out of the 110 e-mails per day she was receiving, she only needed to see five or six.

One of the comments I've heard from one of the executive directors in here (the federal government) is 'Why is everybody sending me this message, asking for my opinion? It's a bloody job they're getting paid \$110,000 a year to do, why can't they do it themselves?' And so I think it's a bit of chicken-heartedness, along with a C YA (cover your ass) mentality that's taken root.

One of the things I'm always struck by is that we spend huge amounts of money on information technology, but absolutely nothing on how people ought to use that technology in a business sense. We give people barely the skills they need to turn things on, and none of the skills they need to use these things effectively in business.

I've developed an online guide that's divided into four sections: How to manage your own time; how to manage information; how to write clear messages; and how to interact appropriately with colleagues.

The really big issue with e-mail, though, is that in normal communication only seven per cent of it is words – the rest is body language, tone of voice, etc. So when you're dealing with e-mail, you're dealing with the least capable way we have of communicating. So you have to be careful to use it at the right time and use it with skill, and we're not doing either of those things right now.

**Peter Turner**, *e-communications strategist (E-Shrink)*

I guess information overload occurs when the person becomes too fragmented, and they're unable in a comprehensive manner to stay on task, or stay on goal. And this occurs because of distractions. So if you get a number of e-mails, or other kinds of messages coming at you, and you don't have any policies of handling that within the company, then your employees can become distracted, and it can affect the bottom line of the organization.

Personally, I receive a lot of e-mails. And one of the things that I recommend organizations do is locate a good e-mail client, one that can be used for searching, that integrates with other tools, that has excellent filters and minimizes the amount of handling that you have to do.

And then, a lot of companies implement an e-mail client but they don't have follow-up – in other words they don't have policies in place to help managers effectively manage the communications they're bombarded with. With the technology, then, you need processes to help manage that technology.

What kind of policies? They could be policies against institutional spam – too many people do blind cc'ing or blind copying of messages, and I think policies can be put into place to reduce that within a business, but they have to be mandated. In my opinion, maybe 30 per cent of business e-mail is institutional spam, where you're being cc'd on an e-mail you have nothing to do with.

Some companies, in fact, have implemented a fine if there's unnecessary cc'ing and things like that.

**Steven Ibaraki**, *Canadian Information Processing Society vice-president*

