

Would we be better off if we sent email into retirement?

November 13 2014, by Tom Jackson



Oh yes, everything's completely under control. alancleaver, CC BY

This year saw the 43rd anniversary of email. Compared to a human working life, email has after more than four decades on the job now reached retirement age. Is it time for email to step aside to allow us to embrace the alternative?

Every minute in 2012 saw 168m emails sent around the world. In [2013 it](#)

[reached 204m](#), but 2014 saw the first ever decline, to 138m emails. Despite the fall in email use, other tools of communication have some way to go to catch up: each minute saw [433,000 tweets on Twitter](#) and [4.7m posts on Tumblr](#). Even adding together all the messages sent by all the other non-email communication platforms doesn't come close to 138.8m messages a minute.

So why does it feel like email has taken over our lives? Certainly email is regularly blamed as the [root cause of workplace stress](#). In a [recent study](#), we explored the physiological and [psychological impact](#) of time spent communicating on UK government employees.

We measured blood pressure, [heart rate](#) and levels of cortisol, a stress hormone and kept paper-based diaries. The study revealed that email does elevate stress when compared to time spent email-free. However, compared to other means of communication measured in this study such as telephone or face-to-face contact email is no worse than any other.

Multi-tasking email alongside other forms of communication such as phone and face-to-face meetings increases stress. For example the results showed the majority of participants (92%) were stressed, with elevated [blood pressure](#) and heart rate readings, during email and phone use. With multifunctional devices like smartphones now making staff accessible 24-hours a day, it's likely this will only make things worse for workers.



Taking blood pressure as part of the 6 month study at a UK government agency

Email's impact goes beyond the office

But enough of the science, what does this mean for you and me? One worrying aspect of our results is that many employees don't realise they're stressed.

Staff felt they were not stressed even when the readings showed their bodies were. This suggests that we may find it hard to self-regulate our use of all the communication tools we have at our disposal in order not to become overwhelmed. What this means is that short, sharp increases in stress levels experienced regularly over the long term such as can lead

to chronic health conditions such as hypertension, thyroid disease and heart failure.

So if email isn't the cause of our communication woes what is? Simply put, we're communication addicts. With the widespread use of smartphones we now all check our messages all day every day – and the majority of us respond to new messages immediately. We live in a constantly connected world where talking face-to-face seems like a thing of the past. We are all now familiar with the scene of a group of friends or family sat around in the same room, each engrossed with their own device.

In business our addiction means we leave the office feeling fatigued, having not completed the tasks we wanted to and feeling lacking in creativity. If we were interrupted every five minutes by an email and each took a minute to deal with and a minute to return focus to what we were doing before being interrupted, we would only have three minutes before the next interruption. If every new interruption is a new task to be completed, the [brain becomes overloaded](#) trying to juggle between eight and fifteen tasks at any one time.

Email isn't perfect, and companies such as Google and Microsoft are still working on new ways of approaching email to overcome these problems, such as Google's [importance ranking in Gmail](#), its new [Inbox app](#), or Microsoft's email-taming [Clutter](#) program.

But the fact is that pensioning-off email wouldn't solve our [communication](#) problems, as it is not the root cause of them. It would simply mean Twitter, Facebook and new tools like them would scale to take its place.

I don't see email retiring – and it still has an important role to play as grandparent in its twilight years. But give it another 20 years and, after a

hard-working life, we could be attending [email](#)'s leaving party.

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