



The Phony Express

Too often, e-mail sacrifices quality for speed.

E-mail has provided a major breakthrough in getting information to people around the world. It's fast, it's cheap and it's easy to flood the unsuspecting public with useful and useless information. What would we do without it?

I'm continuously bombarded with information I don't need to know and don't want to know, and by requests I don't understand. I recently returned from a five-day trip to Dubai, opened my e-mail and was greeted with 437 messages awaiting my attention. An analysis of these indicated that 42 of them, or about 10 percent, weren't pressing and could have been sent in letter form. I spend the first two hours of every day reading and answering e-mails. That's 25 percent of my working day that's not billable to a client.

People expect us to answer our e-mail every day. Sometimes I receive a second e-mail asking why I didn't answer the e-mail that was sent four hours earlier.

E-mail has allowed us to put things off until the last minute. During my trip to Dubai, my laptop's hard drive failed. It was almost like my life had ended. I had no phone numbers. I lost the PowerPoint material for my presentation. People were sending e-mails to my friends asking what was wrong with me.

I sometimes wonder if e-mail is really faster. Often a problem that could be solved in a minute on the phone takes a day as e-mail travels back and forth. I may be old-fashioned, but I like to talk to people on the phone; it gets things done much faster. But please don't let my Internet service go down for even an hour. Today, I can't do business without it.

Another problem related to e-mail is the lack of quality in the information. Some of the information is correct, some of it is just someone's opinion and a lot of it is wrong. People advertise that they're doing things that they're really not doing, promising

items that they can't deliver, and wasting everyone's time with pie-in-the-sky ideas.

I got a message from someone with the e-mail address *MRAB@usedesigns.com*, offering me a speaking engagement on total improvement management for \$8,000 plus expenses. Sounded good, but who is "MRAB"? I don't know. Why would anyone send out a letter and not sign it? I get requests for "a copy of my book," but I have no idea which of my books they mean. Often the words run together, for example, "Jimwillgo." Why is it that we send out e-mail that's grammatically incorrect, poorly punctuated and full of spelling errors? We wouldn't allow that in a letter that we sent to someone. Why is it that we don't have the time to use the spell check or even read our reply before we send it out?

You can't have different quality standards for the letters you mail and the e-mail you send. Quality is a habit; when you start to compromise quality for production and speed, you start to erode the basic personal standards that you've established for yourself.

Although e-mail has replaced paper mail and even the telephone as the preferred method of personal communication, we can't allow it to degrade our quality standards. Our correspondence—and that includes e-mail—is our personal mark of excellence. It's the way other people judge our quality standards. I realize that it's more time-consuming to read what you wrote before you send it. It takes time to run a spell check, and even then the computer doesn't find all the errors. But are you willing to lower the standards you've set for yourself just to save a few seconds?

I once met a vice president of quality from a Fortune 500 organization who said, "Don't worry about the little things; just focus on the big problems." That's OK as long as you're not a customer with one of those small problems. Real quality means

worrying about *all* of the problems. Truly great organizations have no little problems; all problems are important, and they all need to be addressed. There's no problem so small that it can't cause your customer to become dissatisfied with you.

If the six sigma level of performance can be likened to one error in a whole library of books, then six sigma for correspondence would be one error in all the e-mails your employees send out in a year. Based on this, I can testify that IBM, Motorola and General Electric aren't operating at a six sigma level. In terms of their correspondence, most companies aren't even two sigma.

It's time to stop undermining our own reputations and that of our organizations, and start improving the quality of the e-mail we send out. Let's not worry about being at the six sigma level. Let's just try to be a little better today than we were yesterday, and better tomorrow than we are today. How many e-mails can you send out that are both useful and error-free?

About the author

H. James Harrington is CEO of the Harrington Institute Inc. and chairman of the board of e-TQM College Advisory Board. Harrington is a past president of ASQ and IAQ. He has more than 55 years of experience as a quality professional and is the author of 28 books. His latest, The Five Pillars of Organizational Excellence series, includes Process Management Excellence, Project Management Excellence, Change Management Excellence, Knowledge Management Excellence and Resource Management Excellence, and is available from Paton Professional (www.patonprofessional.com). Visit his Web site at www.harrington-institute.com. QD

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