

How long email chains are damaging productivity and performance - study

Attempting to resolve complicated issues via email can leave us feeling frustrated and exhausted. A new study, however, has revealed that reliance on email can be even more damaging than previously thought.



Image source: Torsten Dettlaff from [Pexels](#)

Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa's largest workplace design consultancies said: "Lengthy email exchanges not only sap workers of motivation, but can also cause cognitive deficits which damage and slow our performance at work."

Trim refers to a new report [published on Science Direct](#) by university academics Gajendran, Loewenstein, Choi and Ozgen, which suggests that compared with face-to-face conversation, email not only makes resolution more difficult, but can also worsen one's performance on subsequent tasks.

"There are hidden costs of text-based electronic communication on complex reasoning tasks: motivation maintenance and impaired abilities," Trim noted.

"The popularity of remote work and a norm of constant connectivity have made text-based communications such as email inevitable for many organisational tasks.

"But employees must carefully weigh the costs of using text-based communication for tasks with the costs of meeting in person.

"Long back-and-forth emails only lead to less motivation, but you also suffer cognitive deficits. We have all endured the exhausting process of slipping into an endless exchange of essay length emails."

To measure the toll of endless emails might be taking on his own efficiency, the researchers devised four experiments in which hundreds of paired subjects were divided into two groups. In each experiment, the first group was asked to perform a complicated task in a face-to-face encounter. The second group was asked to perform an identical task using Gmail.



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"Not surprisingly, the pairs working face-to-face were more efficient. In the first experiment, participants negotiating a sales strategy in person took six minutes on average to achieve consensus, while the emailing pairs took 20 minutes on average," Trim noted.

"Email is a great tool for seeing information. But when you need to arrive at a shared understanding, face-to-face communication works a lot better."

The study also showed that the participants who resolved issues over email performed worse on subsequent tasks.

Asked to spot grammatical errors in a news story, the email communicators — now working as individuals — caught 19% fewer errors than those who had communicated face-to-face. The emailing communicators also did 49% worse solving a series of logic problems, and 20% worse on a test of complex reasoning.

These results further showed that people working in jobs with high problem-solving demands felt less excited and energetic about their work at the day's end — and were less likely to report feeling they had made progress.

"Email creates a record of our conversations, and often feels easier than trying to schedule a meeting. But people often use email simply out of habit, without considering the hidden costs.

"We recommend scheduling regular meetings so that outstanding issues can be resolved with less effort. And when caught in a nightmare email chain, be mindful of the toll it extracts before moving on to the next task," Trim concluded.

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