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Making E-mail Work for the Team

By Heather C. Conover
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Finding time to manage work, family, and leisure activity is a huge challenge for most of us. Increasingly one of our time management tools is actually further burdening our time-challenged lives. E-mails, the widely accepted standard method of office communication, has not only left inter- and intra-office verbal dialog a less frequent form of communication, it has also made us less efficient with our time. In a recent *National Public Radio* "Morning Edition" interview, Marilyn Paul, a business consultant and author, commented that people are spending many hours everyday reading, answering, and organizing the deluge of work-related e-mail. She described a personal incident where someone sent a detailed e-mail that obviously took a long time to compose when a three minute phone call would not only have sufficed, but also would have been a better avenue to raise and quickly resolve the issue. She offered some helpful suggestions for managing e-mail at the workplace so that they regain their usefulness as a business tool and do not disrupt workflow.

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Brainstorm to Solve Tough Problems

By Tom McBride, Partners for Creative Solutions, Inc.

Much has been written on how to improve personal and group creativity, but many organizations still have not mastered one of the more powerful creativity tools: group brainstorming.

Good brainstorming techniques enable groups to surpass individuals in the generation of ideas. According to James Adams, author of the classic book, Conceptual Blockbusting, individual creativity is often limited by the following conceptual blocks.

- Perceptual (our paradigms, we see what we expect to see)
- Emotional (judging, low tolerance for risk)
- Cultural (taboos, tradition, "work" and "fun" don't mix)
- Environmental (distrust, distractions, speed of life, problems with boss)
- Intellectual and expressive (inability to organize or verbalize ideas)

Each individual has a unique mix of these blocks, but through diversity a group often overcomes these obstacles and produces more than the sum of its parts. Brainstorming techniques also leverage the power of groups by protecting the egos of individuals and preventing domination by stronger personalities.

Here are some guidelines for more effective group brainstorming.

- Choose participants who are likely to have diverse views of the problem.
- State the problem clearly, and then ask participants to express ideas as they think of them.
- Generate as many ideas as possible.
- Encourage wild ideas. Make brainstorming fun as opposed to being too serious. Lighthearted warm-up sessions, such as "how to protect your garden from predators" can get participants loosened up and into a creative mood.
- Allow absolutely no evaluation of ideas during a brainstorming session. This protects individual egos and helps keep ideas coming.
- Encourage participants to build on the ideas of others.
- Record all ideas on separate sheets of paper to ease manipulation during the evaluation phase.
- When a group seems to run out of ideas, go around the room and ask each member to either provide one more idea or "pass". This provides an opportunity for more reserved individuals to "speak up".
- If not satisfied with the first group's ideas, repeat the process with a second group.

Successful brainstorming produces a large quantity of ideas that must be evaluated in a separate, more critical session. Avoid eliminating ideas prematurely by trying to develop a few of the higher potential ideas before making the final selection. Brainstorming is not for every problem, but if done properly it can produce superior solutions.

Also in this issue...

Massachusetts New Independent Contractor Law

By Sandra LeDuc, CPA, CVA
LeDuc and Sikowitz

Classification of workers as independent contractors has long been a source of confusion and abuse. For years we have looked to the US Tax Court, common law and the Internal Revenue Code to guide us on classification of workers. Massachusetts has just narrowed the definition for businesses in the Commonwealth and provided substantial penalties for lack of compliance.

Until now, guidance has evolved for specific industries and to provide a list of 20 attributes to help a business determine if a worker is appropriately classified as an independent contractor. Such items as the control an employer exercises over a worker, whether the worker offers services to other businesses, whether the worker has an investment in his or her business, whether the relationship is contractual or at will all contribute to the assessment.

The Massachusetts law has distilled these points down and presumes that a worker is an employee unless a business can establish that each of the following three factors have been met:

- the worker is *actually* free from control and direction in connection with the performance of the service and,
- the service is performed outside the usual course of the business of the employer; and,
- the worker is customarily engaged in an independently established trade, occupation, profession or business of the same nature as that involved in the service performed.

A worker is free from control if they are able to demonstrate that they are actually independent and autonomous—they are able to perform the job without direction and to establish working hours and location.

A service performed outside the usual course of the employer's business is easiest to understand in an example. Per diem tax season help hired by tax accountants must be classified as an employee to perform services the firm delivers to its clients. On the other hand, if the same firm hired a per diem network administrator they might pass this test.

The third factor places the worker in the business of providing these services to others.

The government's preferred method of classification is as an employee. Payroll taxes, health insurance coverage, wage and hour regulations dictating overtime and similar terms of employment, workers' compensation insurance, unemployment benefits and entitlement to retirement plan benefits are some of the additional costs and responsibilities that accrue to a business that classifies workers as employees.

This law should be taken seriously. Civil penalties of up to $25,000 for violation without intent can be assessed . Criminal penalties can also be assessed including imprisonment. The Commonwealth has announced that it intends to be rigid in their application of the law.

Making E-mail Work for the Team

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First, Paul says, e-mail should be a secondary tool for communicating with coworkers, clients, vendors, and other work associates. It should also work for the company or team. Together a department or team should review the office e-mail system, pinpointing what works, what doesn't work and why it doesn't work. Recommendations on how to improve e-mail should be made, agreement reached, a trial period implemented, and results discussed as a group after one week. This process should be repeated until e-mail is again an effective and efficient tool for the team.

Shorter e-mails are better, states Paul. E-mails should be no longer than one to ten sentences in length. A longer message should be attached in a document or discussed on the phone or in a face-to-face meeting. Long e-mails leave room for what Paul describes as "circles of conversations in round after round of e-mail." Paul also recommends that after two rounds of attempting problem solving via e-mail, a phone call or face-to-face conversation is in order.

E-mails are time consuming not only to read and answer, but also to open. Subject line protocols can expedite the e-mail process, says Paul, and help both the sender and the recipient speed the e-mail process. Messages in the subject line, such as *No reply needed –NRN or Need a response by – NRB* both save time and avoid the clutter of unnecessary responses. In addition, entire e-mail messages, such as "Meet 2/14 11:00 Okay? END" can be entered in the subject line. These alert the recipient that only the subject line needs to be read and the e-mail message doesn't have to be opened.

Debunking the Myths of Custom Software: Part I

By Rich Eichacker
Vibrance Technology Corporation

A while back I read an article about commercial off-the-shelf software that contained the following introduction: "Only the largest corporations can afford to invest in the design and implementation of their own software. For the rest of us, software applications are available that have been created to conduct almost any type of business."

Not true! In my 10 years working as a software developer, I've found that both these statements are more myth than reality. In addition, I know of many small businesses (not just my clients) who have successfully implemented custom software solutions.

In Part 1 of this series, I'll address the second statement first.

Off-the-shelf software is available to conduct almost any business function

Technically, this statement is correct. If you search the net for "inventory control", "production planning" or "sales quotation" you'll find a plethora of packages that *may* fit your needs. Your first step, of course, is wading through this list to determine which packages may work. Consider the process: 1) visit the web site, 2) research and review the product, 3) obtain and install a demo, 4) review the demo, and 5) get cost quotes. In my experience I've typically found the following to be true: 1) the software does some of what I need it to do, but not all of it, 2) the software is too complex and/or offers too many features that we'll have to pay for and never use, or 3) the package is so unrelated to your needs that it won't even make the first cut.

Let's face it, *every business is unique.* Each has it's own methodologies, culture and processes. If you are looking for a standard accounting package, like QuickBooks, then this isn't a problem, but if the software solution needs to address your unique culture then you may be in trouble. When you implement a software tool that isn't right for your business, you end up "shoehorning" your business into a package that was designed generically for a diverse user base. A custom software package however, is often a better alternative. It will be designed with your unique needs and business requirements integrated so that the finished product will work with your business, not against it. You'll also have the freedom to change the software as your needs change and your company grows.

To obtain more information about creating your own custom software package, see the on-line version of this article at www.ProductivityReports.com

Only large corporations can afford custom software

In Part 2 of this series, I'll address the affordability of custom software, how this cost compares to it's commercial cousin, and how to make intelligent decisions on when and where to use customized solutions.

The Case for Incentives in Non Profits

By John A. Haas, Ph.D.
Management Strategies Group

"Need more funding" describes conditions at the vast majority of non profit organizations, whether in healthcare, education, social services, the arts or other "cause" base. They require sustained fund raising and marketing efforts to continue to deliver on their stated vision and purpose.

The Anti-Incentives Cultural Bias

First, these organizations are not profit-oriented as are most businesses. Already strapped for money, how could they possibly afford to pay incentives?

Employees and volunteers who selflessly dedicate time and effort pursuing the mission certainly are not doing so to maximize their personal income. They passionately believe in the cause, and that's what drives them. If offered incentives, they may well respond "I already work as hard as I can; the prospect of more money won't get me to work any harder!" Offering incentives may at first be construed as an insult.

Legal limitations, ethical guidelines and public disclosure requirements govern compensation practices in non-profits. This applies especially to those engaged in fund raising.

Still, most non profits are struggling to survive and thrive, so they must consider alternative approaches in their "business model."

How Incentives Can Help

Offering key (or, even better, all) employees an opportunity to earn at least some additional compensation can produce the following benefits:

- Encourage clearer definition of organization goals, budgets and plans. Target incentive payouts would be budgeted.
- Identify specific, measurable targets that define how each incentive participant can best contribute through individual and/or team effort within their job responsibilities.
- Participants will pay more attention to measures, and seek and expect regular reporting on progress toward goals.
- Encourage better internal communication and more focused action planning.
- Assuming that all employees seek to do what's best for the organization, incentives help define what "a good job" means for the current period.
- Individual and team goals can be updated for different time periods, reflecting current priorities.
- While money is not the (or a) primary motivator, even a few hundred dollars tied to goal achievement would always be welcome.

Perhaps most important, incentives can generate greater "buzz" and excitement as people are encouraged to think about their organizations and roles in new and creative ways.

Is it Really Your Bank Emailing You?

By Dave Ehlke
Cofounder, Geek Housecalls

It used to be that the biggest threat to your email box was the piles of spam junkmail that you had to wade thru to get to your "real" emails, but not so anymore. Email "phishing" scams have become a major problem.

What is Phishing? According to the AntiPhishing Working Group (www.antiphishing.org) "Phishing attacks use "spoofed" emails and fraudulent websites designed to fool recipients into divulging personal financial data such as credit card numbers, account usernames, passwords, and social security numbers. By hijacking the trusted brands of well known banks, online retailers and credit card companies, phishers are able to convince up to 5% of recipients to respond to them."

Recently, I received an email supposedly from Citibank with a header asking me to validate my bank account. The body of the email was a form with the Citi logo and copyright, with this message:

Dear Citibank customer,

Recently there have been a large number of identity theft attempts targeting Citibank customers. In order to safeguard your account, we require that you confirm your banking details.

Guest Column

This process is mandatory, and if not completed within the nearest time your account may be subject to temporary suspension.

To securely confirm your Citibank account details please go to:

https://web-da.us.citibank.com/signin/scripts/login/user_setup.jsp

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter and thank you for using Citibank!

Citi Identity Theft Solutions

Do not reply to this email as it is an unmonitored alias

This is a very psychologically sophisticated message, with the corporate logo and "concerned" warning about identity theft designed to disarm you. In fact it is easy to see how somebody who's a Citibank customer and in a hurry could easily click that link and in a matter of minutes turn over all of their critical account information to some scam artist. **Beware: this is only one of many phishing scams operating today.**

What can you do if you get suspicious email? As a rule of thumb, you can play it safe by never EVER responding, and never EVER giving out personal information to an unsolicited email contact no matter how legitimate it may seem. If you feel the overwhelming urge to "check it out", do so by contacting your financial institution or whoever supposedly sent you the email via telephone and explaining the exact message you received.

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