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## SPEAKERS

Francis Wade

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It's The Task Management & Time Blocking Podcast, Episode 19.

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Like everyone else who does knowledge work, you receive a lot of emails...more than you'd like. You have harbored dreams of a world in which you could escape this hated chore.

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But over here in reality, there seems to be no way to alleviate the pain...or is there? So people suggest that you simply ignore most of your email. Others say that you need to empty your inbox and even keep it that way all the time. In practice, most people spend more mornings, nights and weekends catching up on email than they care to admit. During the day, they prefer to do what they call real work, not the fake work of reading and replying to email.

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In this solo episode, I'll be sharing my thoughts about this problem, and explore some new thinking that can help us make some headway. I'm Francis Wade, and welcome to the Task Management & Time Blocking Podcast.

01:39

And welcome back, is this your first time listening to the podcast, let me do a little bit of give you a little bit of background to understand exactly why it's designed the way it is. So we'll spend the first part of our conversation actually getting into the nature of the problem. So we'll be defining the

problem. And that will actually take up most of the podcast because once you define a problem in some depth or with some clarity, then often what happens is that some solutions kind of pop out of the diagnosis that you do. So I'm going to quote a very famous person, Albert Einstein just found this quote, and he said, If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem, and five minutes thinking about solutions, and have a good description of the way we do this podcast. At the very end, we'll touch on implementation, but the solution that I hope to take you through and expose you to will all really be exposed in diagnosis, which is kind of the first part.

02:51

So let's start with a story. A year ago, Anita accepted an offer of her first promotion. She imagined more time spent with employees coaching and guiding them to higher performance and personal fulfillment. That's what it would be like. But her reality is all about time spent checking and responding to email. She hated this routine before she got promoted, she should have rejoiced, she thinks,... because now it's become a three-hour-per-day burden. The only tactic that seems to work is to try to do work is to try to do email on weekends, the only time she can catch up. She and other managers agree. This is the most useless part of their job, the one they could do without. But their complaints don't seem to work. She expects her email to increase, not go away, as she shakes her head in bewilderment. Does anyone understand email? Does anyone care?

04:00

So this hopefully, this was a little bit familiar to you. And you may be dealing with somewhere between 50 and 150 email messages per day, which is about the average manager experience, more than others. And if you have more direct reports, then you probably get more than someone who only has one direct report. And if you're in a company that has a culture of managing lots of email, maybe there's a lot of remote work, then you would have a bigger volume of email. And as you could imagine, there's something that happens when that volume increases. Well, let's see. I'm going to assume that you and anybody else who's listening to this podcast, you do expect that as time goes on, your email volume would go up.

04:54

So for Anita it's kind of a natural expectation. You know, if she complained to her boss, her boss would say Come and spend the day in my shoes!, because her boss has probably managing even more email. And as we make the transition from analog natives to digital natives right now, the digital natives are 35 and under...Well, what we could expect is more asynchronous digital communication, not less. And as the world gets accustomed to this preferred way of communicating due to its convenience, what you could expect is...as your business grows, and you deal with more customers, more suppliers, more financiers, more stakeholders that the volume would only go up. So what you really want is probably not to be in denial that this is going to happen, because guess what? It is going to happen, you know, you don't have a choice.

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What you want is something like peace of mind here, here and here, at all levels of email volume. And when as it increases you want to be able to make some transitions to be able to smoothly improve

when, as it increases, you want to be able to make some transitions to be able to smoothly improve your performance. It's a little bit like... imagine an athlete who is building up to run a marathon and has never run one before. Well, what you do is you add a little bit more mileage each week, and your body gets accustomed to that mileage. And if you're going to be someone who's entering a, you know, I my general Olympic Marathon or New York Marathon, but something that's really competitive, and something that maybe could be a part of your living, then you take it very consciously this transition from lower training volumes and shorter races to much longer races Which is what many long distance runners do when they transition to the marathon, they don't just get up all of a sudden, and say they're going to do one.

07:04

So you want to transition to a higher volumes of email and have that transition be be one that's smooth, but the other people are, of course, they don't really care that you're getting lots of email, now, they care that that you respond to them, and that you respond to them soon. And they will not think about you and your dwindling needs and your lack of discretionary time. They're interested in getting a response and if they don't get a responses they send another email. Maybe the second one will get your attention because the first one obviously didn't work.

07:47

So you may call them the villains of your story, in a way. But at a higher level, it's really about your inability to adjust to higher volumes, because you can't wish them away. So they are a permanent villain, because we can do something about our ability to manage email, perhaps. Problem is that, of course, as you're trying to adjust, as you know, Anita is trying to make the transition...life doesn't stop. So the day after her promotion, she gets a ton of email thanking her and wishing her all the best that you know, she's in a honeymoon period for a day or two. And then the real problems start to come...All the problems that that the direct reports have been waiting for their manager...to tell their manager...are now hers. And now the "email with problems" start to arrive as opposed to "email of congratulations". And now she has to cope. Right? She has to somehow find a way to deal. As she tries to adjust or as you try to adjust...inevitably or it's likely that at some point the volume of email will outstrip your ability to manage it.

09:17

So what happens in that case? Well, it happens to all of us. We end up backed up, we end up with a backlog and we fall behind and with the falling behind comes commitments that we don't meet. The expectations that aren't met from other people. The number of unread emails starts to accumulate. We lose sleep because somewhere in that unread email, there could be something important that we're not paying attention to. And we start to feel overwhelmed and anxious.

09:56

Because in our mind, you know...There could be something lurking. And we tell ourselves, we should be the kind of person or the kind of professional who stays on top of email. That's why we got promoted. Because you know, we're a manager, because we're better at it. Supposedly, we're supposed to be on top of things. And it's not cool, to all of a sudden not be on top of things, or to have

someone notice or your boss say, "Hmmm, you know, since we've promoted you, I noticed that you're not on top of things!" You know, you don't, you don't want that conversation to happen. And inside, that brings out feelings of failure sometimes, or you can get upset because you want to want to demonstrate a certain level of capacity or skill, and

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you get frustrated at yourself, you get angry at other people, for sending you so much email, because, you know, in the complaints, over in the lunch room, people, you know, rolling their eyes and saying, I can't imagine how much email I have to do. But shall be awesome if it weren't just for the email. And it turned email into the villain, the email itself and the other people. And it really, is it?

11:18

Well, it's one that those complaints don't do anything about, like I mentioned, in the case of Anita, the complaint doesn't help. It may, you may feel a bit more satisfied, because you know, you're getting it off your chest to some degree. But ultimately, we'll be back in the lunchroom the next day complaining the same way. Because the complaints + complaining doesn't help. And over time, we know kind of what happens, you know, some people figure it out, some don't. Or some people make a better transition to the one level or the next level, whatever it is, and some don't.

11:54

And those who don't...well, you probably know who those people are. They are terrible with email. They don't respond. To get anything done, you've got to walk over to their cubicle or to their office and knock on the door. They have a reputation in the office. Maybe you ask someone, "Hey, what's up with Fred? I sent him an email last week."

12:18

And they say, "Oh, you don't know about Fred?" Huh? "Yeah, Fred doesn't do email." And you're like, what? Everybody does email. "Not Fred!" Now, whatever the reason is, it doesn't really matter. The fact is, your email to Fred has, has apparently disappeared. That hasn't moved the needle one bit. Until you see Fred at lunch. And you say, "Fred, I sent you email a week ago". He says "Really?" He says "Listen, don't sent me anything by email, I'm terrible at email."

12:55

Now, he may be great other parts of his job. But at that part of his job, he is terrible. And you learn, okay, I don't send Fred email from now on, if I really expect a response, I need to do something else. I do find him at lunch. And that's the way I'm going to get by. And that's the way I'm going to succeed as a new manager.

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So Fred's reputation is already you know, bad. And you don't want to be like, Fred. You don't want to be that person...who it's like "Fred and..." Like Anita wouldn't want that. Oh, yeah, "Fred, and Anita, there are two ones who would you don't send email to". Good luck!

13:38

So you don't want to be in that trap. It brings on the threat that our reputation could take a hit. You know, someone important, it could send you email, realize that you're no good at it, because you didn't respond. And then share that with everybody in the office. And say "He's a nice guy" you know, "You're a nice guy. But you know, you're not on top of things." Everyone has the opinion that you are, you know, you're really a Peter Principle person, you're promoted away above your ability to manage. And that messes up your reputation and makes sure that you don't get another promotion. Or God forbid you get demoted or you're forced to leave.

14:26

So, there should be a way to solve this. So this is, unfortunately this does not fall into one of those problems that you might see has been around forever, because it has not been around forever. This is a new problem. And the level at which you need to manage it and think about it has shifted over time. The problem that existed back in 1996, when email first came out is not the problem that we have today in 2022. But what's happened in between to help us solve the problem...is almost nothing.

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So Ideally, there should be, there needs to be, we should expect that there a way to approach this that does move the needle. And doesn't just solve one problem like, "Okay, now I've caught up". And it doesn't just allow you to hit one level, and then stay there. It allows you to keep scaling. So this should be a permanent way to understand what you need to do to keep growing your capacity so that you can always manage future email volume.

15:36

Now that's kind of the world we live in. There's an epic kind of struggle here, it's the struggle to keep up with this new form of communication that we really don't seem to understand all that well. Studies just are missing. And that's part of the reason why we're having this podcast. And it's a level at which it is, which is still exploratory is because there's just not the research. It just doesn't exist, hasn't been done by any, any one in academia, or any of the books that I'm aware of, that really get to the heart of what we're gonna be talking about today. So the result is, you know, because we don't really know, what we're solving here. And it's a new problem it means that the improvements are haphazard, and we don't have much... you know, those five tips to manage your email posts that we see on on blogs, or on on medium or on LinkedIn, we don't have much faith in those. Anything that says Five Tips to Solve Email Immediately...is probably going to be at a real beginner level. It's not going to be substantial. It's not going to solve the big problem that I described at the beginning.

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But you know, we'll read those articles. Because if we're really desperate, it's better than nothing else, right? You try something, try something that, and that's kind of the state of the art right now is "try anything". And it doesn't work. There's not a systematic way that we've developed to tackle that problem, systematic way, well, tips for how to get out of a hole that you're in right now. But nothing that talks about the overall picture, and what you need to do to solve it. So this random approach doesn't work. As I said, it's exacerbated by the fact of No, no, no research.

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The email apps that exist are, they promise all kinds of things, email apps. And they don't, they don't deliver, to say the least. And their books and their tapes, podcasts, people who give advice have different kinds of behaviors to implement. And those seem to be more fruitful, people who describe a particular system that you need to follow a prescription. But if you examine and sort of look at the real details of what they're saying, they don't get close to what I'm talking about...i.e. the management of increasing volume over time. So an article may deal with some aspect of what we're talking about, but it won't deal with them all at once.

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So I'm going to argue that this is kind of a complex problem, for a number of reasons. And to be effective, and to do (and once again) to do that scaling that I talked about that, that steady improvement, regardless of volume, you need to manage, or you need to tackle a bunch of issues, all at the same time. You need to be effective at all of them. This is a multi pronged approach.

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So some of course, you know, just say, you know, get rid of email. Like, Fred...they get to the end of the year, they just hit delete, and delete all their email for the year. And they say, I'm gonna start all over again, if you're gonna need me come and talk to me. You know, they are, terrorists with respect to email communication, they just tear it all up and expect everyone else to adjust.

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Which they don't.

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So backing off of commitments, I'm going to suggest that that's not an option. That's not a solution. That's a coupe out, and maybe you might get away with it one year, next year, the next year, but it's going to come a time when you know, you're going to delete the wrong email. And you're going to fail as a result of it. So that threat doesn't go away. And the chances of it being a fact of your future, chances of it occurring is going to increase as your volume increases. So you're looking at a greater Risk and a greater threat, not less.

20:05

I don't really have a lot of good news here. But it's a reason for us to get ourselves into gear and to think about this with some clarity. So maybe today, I can give you some insight, some progress into how to think about managing your email. So that you can put your mind at ease somewhat with respect to what's coming, again, a further increase, and the time, the way in which you're going to be managing email in the future. So one of the one of the ideas I want to share. Actually, before I actually get to that, which is more about the solutions, let me say if I had you in front of me, this is the point at which I would ask you to, does this resonate with you at all? Do you notice or have you noticed that as the volume of email increases, and you hear from more people, that this ability that you need to develop has become more acute. And as if you don't develop it, the chances of things going awry is increasing, the risk is going up. And that you're someone who is just not willing, if you listen this far, you've not, you know, turned over to Facebook and gone to Instagram or you know, you've just given up, chances are you do want to make a dent in this problem. And you want to make some interventions into your regular routines.

21:43

You want to be someone who has some skill and someone who has some knowledge that you want to have that makes a difference. And I can see that I went from being someone. And I didn't know what I was doing. But no, I could see that I made a journey from someone who treated email as if it was something I could just do between important tasks. To being someone who now sees the management of email as a huge part of my job, huge, not in terms of just the time, not the three hours that Anita's those talking about. But a central and important point of my day. As in it's a, it's a difficult and intense activity, that orients everything I'm about as a professional. So I'm suggesting that email management is one of the most important activities that you could engage in. And in fact, on average, it's the most important thing that you will do every day.

22:53

Now, this is a totally, you know, wild point of view, because most people... And maybe you're one of them, you may be you'll see that your point of view is that email is just a nuisance. Email is like a mosquito, it's to be squashed, somehow gotten rid of repelled. And you hope for the day when all email systems crash, and you'll be free. And as you know, I'm saying that's not coming. I'm saying maybe the way to view email is not as a nuisance, in the old kind of the old schema. And in that old schema, there were techniques you could use to reduce the nuisance. It's instead to see it as the most important activity that you engage in on most days, not every day. But on an average day. The most important... the key period of the day, is the time that you spend doing email. Why would I say all of that? Well?

24:02

Consider this point of view. If you know anything about Kaizen, the idea of continuous improvement, you know that defects are really useful. So defects are useful because they point to areas where you're not hitting a particular standard. So a defect could be for example, an injury that you have when you're training for ( back to the athletics analogy).... training for a sport. A defect would be, for

example, getting injured in training or overtraining. Something happens that went wrong. The standard is that you do your training in order to perform at, you know, in the competition, or in the race or in the game the big game. Ideal training is Not to get injured because that thwarts everything, if you get hurt while you're training that it's a defect. Now, the defect causes you to step back and have to deal with it. But, but it's also a great teaching moment, you know, life is now teaching you that there's only so much you can do. And if you don't pay attention, then you will bring about these defects. And the thing about them is that they allow you to focus your attention, they allow you to bring questions, okay, how do I solve this defect, so it doesn't happen again. And what does it teaching me about my system and its limits? Defects are our friends in the Kaizen or Japanese way of continuous improvement.

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So I want you to consider that email is a defect. Email is a defect, that someone sends email, when there's some communication that needs to take place. And the only way to make it happen, or the best way to make it happen is via email. And that in a perfect world with perfect communication between us telepathy or something, we wouldn't need email. We wouldn't need this form of digital communication. But we use it because it's the next best thing. We need to make requests of each other. We need to put demands requests, make demands on each other, not really meet demand, but we either make requests of each other trigger obligations, trigger demands, trigger time demands, which I'll explain in just a minute. But the email, email is a great way to do it, it is far better than using other kinds of objects that have been used in the past.

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So before the invention of paper, probably all there was was verbal communication. That was it, and memory. And when we had a meeting, or if I wanted to communicate something, all I could do was tell you about it, and you'd have to remember, couldn't write it down. Paper was created. Paper, of course, is a physical object. And that physical object could capture what are called "time demands". So I don't want to introduce a lot of new jargon in this podcast, but a time demand is an individual and internal commitment to complete a task in the future. So it's a promise that you make yourself. It's individual means it's personal, and when it belongs to you. And it's a commitment to complete a task in the future. Okay, so a time demand will be captured on paper. And that worked, because paper is pretty effective. But in the mid 90s, paper was replaced by digital communication. For the most part, the replacement started, and it continues to this day. But everyone, the world agreed that digital objects for managing time demands is far superior than physical objects. And so the whole world has made a shift. The problem is that you couldn't send 510,000 letters or a million. You couldn't you couldn't send an unlimited number of messages using physical objects.

29:00

But with digital objects, you sure can with a click of a button five minutes later, everyone on your mailing list...now has you asking them to do something. And that could never happen at scale before before the creation of digital objects. Now, what email has preserved is the fact that you could send an asynchronous communication so before you if you have if you're on television, you could speak to an audience and then you could trigger a time demand. Everyone Tune In next week when we're back

here at... which would make us want to see what happens in the next episode. So then make a mental commitment. Oh, because you communicated it to them electronically at scale. But it was all synchronous, right?

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The great thing about email is that it's introduced asynchronous communication. So like a letter, you could send someone a letter now, it gets there in two weeks time. And it triggers a time demand when the letter arrives and they read it, something happens, right? They make a commitment...same thing with email. Great thing about email, digital communication is that it's asynchronous, it can get stored, you can send it now, it arrives later, it goes through the same process, it triggers a time demand. But you don't have to be talking to the person to initiate the trigger or make the request. This is really cool. And this is why you could send so many email messages because digital objects are far better than physical objects.

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So what happens when you send an email to someone? Well, let's dig a little deeper. So an email arrives in your inbox. And it's, again, it's a form of digital communication. It's sitting there, it's just a bunch of bits and bytes, sitting in somewhere in cyberspace. And until you access that email, and read it, nothing much is going on, except bits are occupying space on some storage device.

31:22

But once you read the email, something psychological happens. Okay? So the creation of a time demand, as you're reading that email is a psychological activity, right? It's something that happens in your mind. And until you read that email, nothing psychological is happening with respect to a time demand. So it's sitting there in your inbox, this email. And until you interact with it, it's a "potential" time demand. Until you read it, and activate it so to speak. It could then become an "actual" time demand. So email inboxes, contain potential time demands until you've interacted with it. And you turn some of them into actual time demands. Two different kinds of psychological objects, right? They're both triggered by the same email, same message, the same digital object. So potential becomes actual. Sometimes, you just simply delete the email, and it disappears, it doesn't turn into anything, potential turns into nothing. And probably most of the email that you receive, I get about 250 emails a day, I think about 10 of them are converted into actual time demands.

33:02

So this process is one that you can't escape, this is just kind of how it works. And this is why the volume of email doesn't matter as much as we think it should. Because if you can filter potential time demands that will never become actual time demands away from you, then you're good. If you can somehow focus your attention on the few potential time demands that turn into actual time demands, and do that with some skill, then you're even better. Because now you could be getting 1000 email. But if 1000 emails only yield 10 active time demands, then we're talking about something a different kind of problem. We're not talking about a filtering problem, as opposed to a decision making problem.

33:58

Now, we're using all this fancy language, but I don't want to underestimate the problem. The filtering that we most of us do each day, doesn't take place by machine, it takes place by us personally. And this activity of filtering email, and turning it into potential time demands, sorry, into actual time demands from potential town demand. And then managing the time demands and putting them in a secure place is what I refer to as the most part your day, on most days. Why? Because most people are interacting with you via email. You don't go to a meeting every day necessarily. And you don't go to a meeting every day that generates any time demands for you. You could be in a meeting all you know, three straight days and you don't walk away with a single time demand for you. But your email is a concentrated place for....we usually think of it as the management of messages. In this podcast, I'm casting a whole different view of it a whole different lens, which is that it's for the management of actual time demands. It's for the filtering of potential time demands away from you. And the attraction and conversion of potential time demands, the actual time demands for the ones which you care about. Okay.

35:32

So this most important part of your day, is, requires your best attention. Because as you go through email messages, you probably noticed that it's hard. So what, what, what makes it hard? Well, the volume doesn't help. But each, every time you go through your email inbox, whether it's low volume or high volume, you need to switch contexts between messages. Because the people who send you emails aren't sending them in a way that's coordinated. They're not sending it to me in a way that's flagged that says, Oh, this is spam, or both. They're all trying to get your attention. They all want you to convert a potential time demand to an actual time demand, which takes all the energy on your part to focus. And you got to make a lot of decisions. So if you've ever heard this statistic that said, some survey said that a third of people would rather clean a toilet than go through all their email. Well, the reason that, people responded that way on the survey is because of the number of decisions that have to be made, in the email that you have not processed. So in that email that you haven't processed, there's a whole bunch of decisions you need to make. And as you make your decisions, you're flipping from one context to the next. One part of your life to the other emails from your boss, or interspersed with emails from your kids, emails on the project are interspersed with, with communication from HR that about your benefit plan. Spam is interspersed with email communication from your CEO who need something urgently. So it's like a box of chocolates you gotta get for us. But it's not a tasty black box of chocolates, it's a pain. And this is why you want to give it your best time, give it your absolute best energy at clear mind. Because regardless of the volume, you must engage in this activity as long as the world is sending email. So we're talking about an activity that is not escapable. And it will always be require high energy because you're switching between contexts. If you're switching at high volumes, it makes it even worse.

38:12

So how could you think about gaining some skill at managing and doing this activity at a higher level? Well, so let's talk about one one that I mentioned before, very briefly, which is to shuffle away, or to stream away or filter all of the email that is unlikely to turn into an actual time demand. So first thing is your spam filters need to be strong. And spam management is not an option in this world that we live in.

38:54

You may probably respond, to subscribe to newsletters, and some of those newsletters, generate more actual time demands than others. So I use a program called Unroll. That allows me to manage time demands. It filters away the ones that belong to a newsletter. It does a really good job. I train it basically it's something that I've it's a program I've trained that all the emails that are unlikely to turn into actual town miles get filtered over somewhere else, and managed in a different place. So there's a number of programs that allow you to do this. I'll put the link in the show notes, but this is a good one. And it's the future. Because if you're gonna be managing large numbers, you need a strong filter up front. So there's your spam filter. Yeah. But there's also your newsletter filter, where the ones that are unlikely to yield an actual time demand ... with less probability are shuffled and placed somewhere else? No, I'm not necessarily saying that you delete all of them, which is what some people recommend you don't read any newsletters. What I'm suggesting is that you find a way to manage them off track, and it's a probability game. Because you don't want to cut yourself off from sources of information or knowledge. You don't want to be someone who is separated from the world don't pay attention to certain news items, you've got to watch what's happening in your industry, there's a bunch of things, potential time demands, that could become actual, but it's a probability game, right? You want the lowest probability ones to be filtered away. And when they're filtered away, they're placed in a repository, some kind of library, some kind of database somewhere where you can go and read and process that email at your leisure. So you time block a different time on your calendar that says go through newsletter, and that when you go through all these newsletters at the same time, the ones that escape that filter have a much higher probability of generating actual time demands. And those are the ones that hopefully you're sitting down to look at.

41:21

So if I were to tell you that the problem of managing 100 emails is the same as the problem of managing 5000 emails a day, you'd probably tell me I'm crazy. But what we're looking for here are principles. The principle is that we're looking for the, the messages with the highest probability of turning into actual time demands to make it past our filters. So we're talking here about partly a filtering problem. It's not only a filtering problem, and that's a huge part of it.

42:02

Part of it also is what I mentioned before, which is that you are giving the best time of the day, the premium attention to managing these potential to actual time demands, the ones with high probability, another part of it.

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Another piece of the whole puzzle, is measurement. So I'm not found an email program, I'm sure one exists somewhere. But I've not found an email program that measures email. So this is other than saying, "here's the number of unread emails in your inbox". So there's no way to scale past the particular level of points without confronting the analytics of your email, such as how many messages come in per day, if you could measure how many were filtered away. So the potential 10 demands

with low probability, how many were filtered in the right way, I'm gonna build it in the wrong way. If it could measure all of that, and tell you how well you're filtering is working. You'd be really happy, right? If it were 90% effective? You'd be like, Yes, great. How much time you're spending in the whole process, managing it in those peak times of day?

43:26

How long it's taking for you to reply to emails? Is it ideal for the kind of work that you're doing? The number of emails that you send out each day? Time it takes you to compose? So there's some...this is the real problem, right? So okay, there's got to be analytics to help you to scale. So I use a couple of programs right now. I'll put the put them in, as I mentioned them in the show notes that I use to manage my analytics around my email usage. Now, they're not terribly useful yet. But the time will come when a really good program will integrate itself into Gmail, and will allow you to manage your email with more skill. But it's better than nothing right now. And right now, this is such a sort of a great green area where the exploration that we're not even sure exactly what to measure. So I've mentioned a few things here. A couple of ideas. Actually, I just mentioned to you for the first time, because as I'm explaining the issue, they're coming to me, some of the things that I want to have measured, like the number that get filtered correctly versus the ones that don't get filtered correctly...I never thought of that before. But we need metrics. So we need analytics.

44:54

So if you're serious about scaling, you've got to be like hmmm, looking out for analytics looking out for email programs that give you more than just kind of dumb metrics and what the number that are in a inbox. We want in process metrics, How well am I doing at this task and where are my opportunities for improvement? And given that I'm going to be looking at managing 25% more email in a year's time? How am I scaling my skills? And how am I preparing myself, do the numbers show that my capacity is growing. So these are commonplace concepts that I'm talking about in other areas, other disciplines, it's just that we've not applied them to email this, this is not a temporary issue. This is not a some time problem. Part of the reason I can argue this with some conviction is that the people in your life who want to get your attention, that number is going to increase, they're going to use more email than ever before, it doesn't matter whether it's email, WhatsApp, Apple message, it doesn't, the form of the messaging doesn't really matter. We're just talking about all digital, asynchronous communication, all digital objects that are sent to you, as potential time demands, so that you could convert them to actual time demands, regardless of where they come from, in your universe, as long as they're coming from some source, and that source is sending them to you in a some kind of stream, that's, that's not a smooth stream, it's a kind of a random stream of whatever they think is important. This is not going away. It may not be Gmail, maybe some other form of mail tomorrow, it doesn't matter. They're all equivalent for the purposes of what I'm talking about ....the psychology, the underlying problem doesn't go away, because you're now using Outlook versus Gmail, no we wish.

47:02

So that doesn't go away, you've got to get better. And the people who use are on the other end, they're not going away. So the fact that they're not going away, what does that mean? So you could hope for a day when they get trained to not send you messages that are unlikely to turn into actual

time demands. You could hope for a day when they respect your inbox, or send you clear emails, for that matter, you know, where there is a time demand in there or a potential time demand that real high level of actual you ask them a question. They're responding. And as you read their response, you're like, I have no idea what this means. And half an hour later, you still don't know what they're talking about. So then you have got to respond. Politely, "I didn't understand. Could you clear up what that..." this is why email is the most important thing that you will do most, most days, and the average day. That's actually something I've have not quite thought of, and said before, in a way I just said it. But on average day, yeah, this is the most important activity that you do. So we want to bring a level of kind of a respect to it, because we can't escape it, right? So they're not getting better at sending email.

48:27

And the fact that they're not getting better anytime soon, means that you've got to be more prepared. If you want to stay out of overwhelm, and you don't want to get buried. So the onus is back on you. So you've got to be extraordinarily prepared...for the time when, you know, they're not going to understand the potential versus actual time demands. They're not going to understand time demands, they're not going to understand triggers, the technology will be slow to come to them. The measurements won't be there. These things are not happening anytime soon, I could share with you I'm going to share with you an idea that I've had.

49:12

So in addition to training people in your company, and training your customers, suppliers training everybody in your universe, Nirvana, right? What, what I'd love to see happen is that in companies for internal email, that email has a budget. So if email had a budget, each person could only send a certain number of emails for free, and after that they'd have to pay. So it probably wouldn't be deducted from their paycheck. But as you can imagine, you could put in place some gamification that says this person has 100 units of email per month. Use it wisely. If you don't, and you have to request more units, you will be having a conversation with your boss. No, all of a sudden, it's kind of like, whoa, before I send that email to everybody in the company, telling them about nothing, taking up their bandwidth. Maybe I would think about it before hitting send and seeing how many units is this going to take off. Back to the idea of email being a defect. Now, you're looking at ways of actually reducing email, which...Guess what? That should be an objective of every company.

50:44

Why? Because email is very costly, the activity of scanning your email, scanning potential time demands to convert them to actual time demands, is expensive. And a convoluted email sent to 30 people, the cost is ridiculous. And there's no repercussions. Maybe in your performance management, you might sit down, the person's boss might sit down with them and say, "Hey, you know, notice that you've been sending lots of email". And you say "I don't think it's that many". And you say, "Well, for example, the one you sent last week..." - "That one was really important."

51:28

"Yeah, but over the months, you know, I get the impression you've been sending too many, too many

year, but over the months, you know, I get the impression you've been sending too many, too many people." ...."How many???" So with no metrics, there's no real conversation to have, there's no feedback. So if you start with the idea that email is a defect and defects are to be eliminated. And that a company needs to get by on the minimum number of emails that it sends/ that are sent. And that there needs to be measurements to encourage people to get better at email, so they send fewer messages. Then a CEO can say, well, could we get to the end of the year, or send 25% less /fewer emails, and still achieve our goals?

52:12

Consider it to be a quality measure, poor quality environment, lots of emails, lots of defects, higher quality environment, only the absolute minimum number of emails are sent. If you don't buy my argument, that email is expensive... Again, let's go to that email that was sent to the 40 people, each of them has to spend a whole bunch of time processing it. So that's 40 times whatever amount of time it's, it takes. And the overall overwhelm it adds to because here's another email could be something important, so people can't ignore it. I'll give you an example. An actual. There was a company I worked with. And Vice President mentioned to one of his direct reports, "I think you're taking too long to respond to my email. So for my email, I want you to read and respond within an hour".

53:07

So email is very expensive. Email is costly. Email is a defect. And companies need first a commitment to understand what email is all about. Some of the things I've talked about, need to be understood. They need measurements. So that at least we have an idea of the impact and the ways that it could be improved.

53:07

So the person said, "Aye Aye Sire!" And they dutifully let their colleagues know that listen, the Vice President said that anybody sending him email, needs to respond within the hour. And if you have been in a situation like this, where everyone is stuck in their inbox, scanning it just in case, the vice president sends a actual time demand or something that results in an actual time demand. And therefore spends a better part of their day suffering. Because they need to check email over and over a checking and checking and checking, and therefore no more work done. You know, what I'm talking about? The article I wrote, I'll drop it in the show notes, again, is "How executives unwittingly turn employees in to morons". And it has it has everything to do with making requests like that. That highlights the cost of email, because that Vice President's request, turns everyone into the company into email checking machines, so they have to check email every hour just in case, the vice president sent them an email, which means they have to check all of their messages. Okay.

54:38

And then we need some games. And so by Some games, I mean, for example, you get to the end of the year 25% less email, same revenue, and the following year 25% Less email and same revenue...they need to set these kinds of targets. And again, my argument is that number four, maybe the reasons that they need to do this is because email is so expensive. Email is so costly. And

the cost is not being, it's not being confronted by any particular executive. Unfortunately, in most, I've not seen a company where it's properly being tackled. And I think the reason is, because it's nobody's job. Now ultimately, it's the CEOs job, but whose job is it, that we improve our productivity in the way that we use email? IT? Operations? HR? Learning and development? It's nobody's job.

56:03

So it afflicts every single knowledge worker in the company. And it destroys productivity, and it gets worse. And everyone gathers around the lunch table and complains about what email they have. And there's no one working on even the beginning of a solution.

56:21

So this is a lot.... maybe an episode that you go back to listen to very, a few times, because I've touched on a lot of different things. But they all need to be thought of together. Because email presents a challenge that the workplace has never seen before. We really don't know what to do with this, we don't know how to think about it, we don't have the models that that we need to make either corporate progress, or just progress. For me as an individual, it's kind of a mystery. I don't know other than to do what Anita said, which is not sustainable. I spend my weekends or my nights or my mornings, or my vacation and my sick days, and my lunch time catching up on email. Because I'm still in the old model of 1995, where email was this rare thing that came in once a day, and when it came in was like, Oh, I got an email, and you got one email per day. And the habits that we developed for the one email per day, haven't scaled. And that's what's causing the problem that we have.

57:31

So I hope in all of this, there are some solutions that you can pursue, and a trajectory, a journey that you could put yourself on where this this is a this is a little bit like taking care of your health. In the domain of wellness, there's taking care of your physical health, let's say your aerobic capacity, your aerobic abilities. So from now until the day you die, you should be concerned about your aerobic capacity, right should be concerned about what happens when you need to your heart rate goes up, and lungs need to... the body needs to your muscles need to.... That's something you need to care about from now until the day you die.

58:12

Guess what, you're probably getting an email right up until the very end. And you need to care about this problem the way you care about these other kinds of lifelong problems, because it's only going in one direction. You know, for most of us, our health is not going to improve dramatically. Once you get a little bit older, you know a couple of gray hairs, your health is not going to Oh, make a sudden improvement.

58:41

Email is not going to Oh... The volume is going to drop... There's always going to be digital

email is not going to Oh ... the volume is going to drop. There's always going to be digital asynchronous communication. And you'll always be needing to manage the volume effectively. Just because we haven't seen it happen before doesn't mean it's not coming to a retirement home near you, or to a retirement dream that you want to live or that I want to live. So thanks for joining me on this podcast. It's not finished. I want to tell you a little bit about the next episode. After a couple of moments. Stay tuned. Keep listening