

The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your Email Before it Manages You

by Mike Song, Vicki Halsey & Tim Burress
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Who of us doesn't know the frustration of painstakingly sorting through the treasure (some) and trash (mostly) of a cluttered email inbox, only to find that it magically refills days (or even hours) later.

Many readers may resonate with variations of the following routine: The "bing" of our inbox reminder (if you haven't already wisely turned off such automated distractions!) lets us know an email has arrived. We allow ourselves to be distracted from more important tasks by our curiosity over what has arrived. We note that this time it isn't junk, but an email from a member or co-worker that needs a thoughtful response. We know we don't have time at that moment to do what is needed to give the sender a thoughtful response or find/produce the requested information, so we keep it in our inbox to be reminded "later." Unfortunately that nebulous "later" doesn't arrive for days or even weeks until we accidentally stumble upon the message moldering away in the deep, dark crevices of our inbox. Embarrassed, we dash off a hurried response peppered with apologies.

These and a myriad of other challenges confront us as we try to cope with the mountain of email that streams our way. We live in the information age, and our inbox alone often proves to be a tsunami of (mostly useless) information clamoring loudly for our attention. For many (including this reviewer!), failure to develop a wise pattern for dealing with electronic communication can become a significant time waster in our schedule. The ministry is stressful enough with adding to it that uneasy feeling that emails deserving our attention are forever stacked up like planes over O'Hare. Many of us need a better system of inbox traffic control!

The Hamster Revolution seeks to help the busy worker cut through the clutter and seize control of the inbox. While written primarily for those working in larger corporate environments, there is much that the busy pastor could gain from this easy read. The couple hours it takes to read this book could pay the reader back with interest with its simple insights that could save many hours.

Here is a brief sampling of some of the most useful suggestions:

- Send less – get less! We may often be much more a part of the problem than we realize. That's why the simplest and perhaps most helpful piece of advice in the book is this: "send less – get less." Since for every five emails we send, we will receive responses back from three (often beginning a long string of emails), if we eliminate even just one in five emails we send, research shows we reduce our inbox glut by 12%. In order to apply "send less – get less," the authors encourage us to pause to ask three questions before sending any email:
 - Is it needed? "If you take a moment to visualize your email recipient struggling through a typically busy day with a bunch of meetings and 100 emails in his inbox, you'll send fewer and fewer unnecessary messages." (21) To use a biblical analogy, before we get all upset about the speck of unnecessary emails with which any particular sender clutters our inbox, perhaps we would do well to check for large beams of such emails protruding from our own outbox! We have met the unwitting spammer, and he is us.
 - Is it appropriate? Before we send out that rambling rant about some ministry brother's supposed cluelessness (thus revealing our own?) or that humor that may be on the edge of appropriate, it would do us all well to consider how "slippery and sticky" email communication is. "It slithers and squirms into the oddest places and it sticks around

- forever” (25). Email can be a wonderful tool to get gospel work done. It can also easily become an unwitting accomplice in our dishonoring the gospel.
- Is it targeted? Be careful with that powerful tool called “reply all.” Hitting “reply all” encourages everyone else included in that email to feel the need to do the same – lest they appear disinterested – thereby returning the favor exponentially! Also watch out for sending out needless “Cc’s” when those listed really don’t need to be included. Again, picture others’ cluttered inboxes!
 - Strengthen the Subject! Too often our subject lines leave the recipient clueless about what might be lurking within our emails. The authors encourage using a two part subject line. The first part includes one of five categorizing words: action (a “to do” item needed from the recipient), request, info, confirmed (action/request received, report on completed task), delivery (item requested is attached). After that categorizing word, they encourage adding a descriptive title that makes it evident what is in the email. Here’s an example: Action: Board of Elders Meeting 12/10 at 7 PM.
 - Sculpt the Body! After presenting an example of a “wall of words” style of email that leaves many searching repeatedly (perhaps in vain!) for what the email’s “take home” is, they present a simple template for work related emails:
 - Brief greeting
 - Followed by three headings with bullets beneath:
 - Action
 - Here is what you are asking, from whom, and by when
 - If “delivering” something asked, state what is being delivered and include enough context to remind the recipient why this is coming his/her way (“Here is the report on Sunday School attendance requested at the last Board of Education meeting”)
 - Background
 - Any other necessary details the recipients need to complete what is being asked
 - Critical elements to note in what is being delivered
 - Close
 - “next steps and niceties” and “auto-signature” (41)
 - COTA Filing System The authors go beyond suggestions for emails by also offering advice on how to organize computer folders and files (as well as mirroring this in any paper files still kept) in ways that can help find information more quickly on increasingly massive hard drives. Their chief goal is to reduce the number of primary folders that are found in the typical “My Documents” folder. Often the folders end up being redundant with multiple places where the specific file we are searching for could be hiding. The organizational suggestion they have is to create only four primary sub-folders under “My Documents.” Their acronym for those four folders is COTA: Clients, Output, Teams, and Administration. They believe organizing all other computer folders under those four broad categories can considerably reduce time wasted in hunting and searching for a needed file. Since this book was written for the business world, here’s a suggested acronym modification for the Lutheran pastor/teacher: SOLA - Souls (Students), Output, Leadership (groups/boards/committees/teams you work with to carry out ministry), and Administration. For example, under the “Output” primary folder would be folders for “Sermons,” “Bible classes,” “Bulletins,” “Newsletters,” etc.) When in doubt about where to file a particular sub-folder of items, the authors suggest always going to the “higher” category since their acronym (and the suggested ministry replacement) is intentionally organized in importance order: souls who are being served with the gospel, output of documents/programs produced to serve those people, leadership groups that exist to help produce/direct ministry to those people, finally followed by the necessary (though often tedious!) administration that keeps it all organized.

There are a couple tiresome characteristics of The Hamster Revolution. The book’s organization follows the sometimes contrived format of being a running series of appointments between an “info-coach” and a worker who has turned into a hamster. Then there is the ever-present marketing ploy typical in many business books of attempting to drive you to their web sites where you can sign up for more email (!), download “free” products (where will you file those?), and sign up for further (paid) courses and coaching.

Yet those irritations don't change the fact that this little volume offers simple suggestions that could indeed save many hours. This reader finds quite credible their research based claim that a typical worker could reclaim 15 lost days per year by following just their basic email suggestions. While the book itself won't make us better preachers, the time saved just may!