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E-Mail Doesn't Take a Holiday

By JOYCE COHEN

HOWEVER tough it is to return from vacation, it's tougher still to return to an e-mail in-box filled with hundreds, or even thousands, of messages that have piled up in your absence.

Brian McLendon, a publicist at Random House, is bracing himself. He will be on vacation next week, when his office in Manhattan is closed. Since many others will also take that week off because of the holidays, he figures he will return to a light load: 200 to 300 messages rather than the 1,000 or so he usually faces after a week away.

"I have my coping strategy," Mr. McLendon said. "I know it is coming, so I prepare for it. I don't answer my phone until lunchtime." Instead, he hunkers over his desk, deleting spam en masse, sorting by sender and date, and separating informational e-mail messages from those requiring action.

Of the 1,000 e-mail messages he typically receives after a week off, 200 of them, he said, are spam. Another 150 are what he really hates: "chime-in" e-mails, or messages copied to several people, each of whom replies with a thanks, a comment or an acknowledgment.

For those unhappy about devoting their first back-to-work hours to a tedious slog through an overflowing in-box, there are other strategies for dealing with postvacation glut. An obvious one is to clean out the in-box while on vacation, using a laptop, hand-held device, hotel computer or Internet cafe.

"Today's reliance on e-mail has changed the nature of vacation," said James E. Katz, director of the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University.

If you do clean your in-box, he said, you're "defeating the purpose of vacation, which is to get away from the office and do something different."

If you don't, "you have to work twice as hard when you come back," he said. "And while you are responding to those, new ones come flooding in." In some ways, he said, "you are punished for taking vacation, by out-of-control e-mails."

Diane Danielson of Brookline, Mass., lost control last year when she decided to prevent a pileup during a vacation in the south of France, where she had Internet access temptingly at hand. She intended only to clear out her junk mail, but while she was at it, she innocently answered a message about rescheduling a speaking engagement.

"It created this big, stressful thing - four days of negotiating back and forth" about two people's schedules from six time zones away, said Ms. Danielson, founder of the Downtown Women's Club, a networking organization. "It would have been better if I had never looked at my e-mail until I returned.

And if I missed an opportunity, so what?"

The next summer, also in France, she ignored her e-mail until she returned. "It was great," she said. "In my view, vacation is when you don't wear a watch, you don't have anyone checking in on you."

Many, though, feel the opposite. For them, failing to keep up with their e-mail is stressful. "You become very nervous if you are out of pocket or out of touch," said Ira Schacter, a lawyer at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft in Manhattan. In pre-BlackBerry days, he crashed his company's server when 8,000 e-mail messages piled up while he was on vacation.

(Even today, not every in-box has infinite capacity. Some people clean out their in-boxes because they must. In-boxes that are filled to the limit, often with large picture files, can crash a computer, slow it down or reject new messages.)

Now, four years later, Mr. Schacter works feverishly to keep pace. On a recent trip to Vietnam and Cambodia, he muddled through when he had no access to e-mail by having his secretary cull his e-mail messages and fax him important ones once a day. He still devoted his first day back to his backlog.

This month Jeff Abraham of Pittsburgh tried to tread a middle ground during a long weekend in Montreal with his wife, Heloise.

He considered taking his laptop because he so despises the overflowing in-box he knows will be awaiting him. "It is easier to get it over with than to deal with the onslaught when you get back to work," said Mr. Abraham, vice president for marketing with the [Education Management Corporation](#).

But he decided to forgo the laptop because "it was supposed to be a romantic weekend without the kids, and typically e-mail and romantic weekends don't mix."

Instead, he checked three times from the hotel's computer. His wife had to drag him away. "You sit down for 15 minutes, and 90 minutes have passed," he said. "You get hypnotized." Though he managed to delete some 500 e-mail messages, he returned to 600 more. "I take a deep breath, sit down with a big cup of coffee, and start getting rid of it."

Not everyone minds having to rummage through a full in-box. Amy Drescher, a technical writer, gains some amount of satisfaction in the process. She likens it to cleaning out the closet or doing laundry.

Her family spends a week at the beach each winter and summer. "After being away, I am kind of excited to be back," said Ms. Drescher, who works from home in Cheshire, Conn. "On the way home I think about all the things I have to do. I make lists. I like coming back and seeing what has gone on when I've been away. It gets me totally back in the mood for work."

It took her a long time to learn she could leave her e-mail behind. Last winter, vacationing in the Florida Keys, she had a "flash of panic" at the e-mail messages piling up. She found a local library with Internet access, signed up for a time slot, and scanned through several hundred messages.

Her husband and two young sons were totally annoyed, she said. "We had only one car on vacation, so they had to drop me off and hang around till I was done."

Her new attitude is, Let it accumulate. "I like to be in the thick of things, and I think I am so important that I need to be always checking e-mail," she said. "But if I am not available, problems will still get

solved. The company is not going to go down without me."

Then again, there is something to be said for being busy, important and in such demand that others pelt you with e-mail messages. "It is like a badge of honor," said Mr. McLendon of Random House. In his workplace, e-mail volume is the first topic of conversation when someone returns from vacation.

"People check and compare and see who has the most e-mails," his assistant, Sarina Evan, said. "They say: 'Oh, I've been gone a week and I had 300 e-mails. It took me hours to go through.' "

Though Mr. McLendon typically returns to about 1,000 e-mail messages, Ms. Evan received only 70 or so when she last went away. Her boss gets more than that when he takes a long lunch.

"When I have a hot book, I can be out for two hours and have 100 e-mails," he said.

Sure enough, quantity of e-mail is some measure of importance. "The more senior you grow, the more e-mail you get," said Candace Sidner, a research scientist at [Mitsubishi Electric](#) Research Laboratories in Cambridge, Mass., who co-authored a study of e-mail use. "Some very senior managers have staff devoted just to their e-mail."

One reason a pile feels overwhelming, she said, is that tasks arrive by e-mail. If it can't be immediately deleted, the message falls into the potentially time-consuming category of "to do" or "to read," or the even more burdensome category of "indeterminate status," where you can't decide what to do with it.

Dr. Sidner had no easy answers for coping with the glut, though filters that sort e-mail messages into subfolders can help.

In the meantime, "it's part of going on vacation and coming back to work," she said. "I accept that it's a phenomenon that happens."