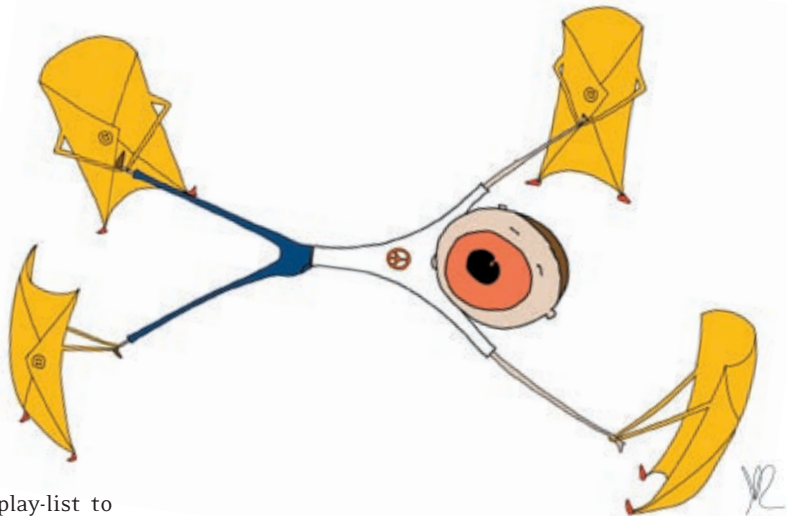


UNPLUGGED

Our ever-so-slightly alternative-lifestyle-inclined **Callum Laing** seeks solutions for the deskbound email addict.



Pouring myself a stiff drink and tuning the play-list to “random eclectic” I fluffed up the cushions, lit a few candles, turned off my phone and settled into a nice quiet evening of... email.

Ah, email: the pervasive application straddling the Internet and connecting people the world over, bringing families back together, loved ones closer, allowing businesses to scale faster - and providing constant distraction from our day jobs.

Ten years ago you wouldn't walk into a job interview unless you had 'multi-tasking' somewhere on your CV and could wax lyrical about successfully juggling multiple projects. Today, the focus has shifted to, well, focus. 'Spot lighting', as over-paid management consultants call it, is the skill of giving undivided attention to one project to ensure it gets done to the standard required.

The problem is that on each of our computers lies a built-in distraction that regularly pops up to test our resolve. Assuming MSN Messenger is turned off, and discounting the endless stream of spam, you're probably still overwhelmed on a daily basis by a hundred or more emails demanding your attention.

Heaven forbid we should ever go on holiday; the backlog upon our return is normally enough to remove any and all happy holiday memories. Blackberrys and various other handhelds mean that, theoretically, you can at least stay on top of your emails as they come in - but is that really the answer?


Perhaps there is more to be said for going on a holiday - not from work, but from email. What do you do when you get back from a trip? Having put off the inevitable for as long as you can by showing off your tan to colleagues until they hate you, you finally bite the bullet, shush everyone within earshot, and take the afternoon to plough your way through the 1,000-plus emails that rushed to flood your inbox when you started up Outlook.

You scan through and delete spam and low-priority emails. Bang: out go all newsletters. Events and meetings that have passed are the next to receive deletion. Joke emails and forwards from friends get nothing more than a cursory glance before being binned or 'filed'. Now you're down to maybe 200 or 300 emails that need to be read, replied to or generally 'actioned'. You read the first one, then the next. Then you stop. This could take all night. But you are ruthless, and manage to get the list down to 100. A cup of tea, and then you bushwhack it down to 50. But that's still too many. You delegate 20, then another 20 - if it's really important they'll email you again. Down to 10. And, refreshed from your holiday, you're feeling strong enough to deal with those!

If you can do that when you come back from holiday, you could, logically, do the same during the workweek.

If most of your emails are low priority and don't require an immediate response, what would be the consequence of only opening your emails once a week? Well, for most of us it would mean getting the sack, but the same principle applied on a daily basis has its benefits.

Waiting until 5 pm to check your email for no more than an hour sounds scary, and takes great discipline. After all, who doesn't instinctively check their email when they come back from lunch (not to mention the toilet)? But stick with it, and email deprivation can be a very enlightening process that rapidly changes the way you approach your workday.

Occasionally, you might even treat yourself to a weekly clean-up. I like to do it under the influence of candlelight, good music and a nice stiff drink! 

Look out for Part II of this three-part series for a look at how to wean yourself off the mobile phone, and, finally, Part III, in which Mr Laing discusses the perks of being ostracised by society and living as a hermit. [I think our readers can do without Parts II & III. Get the poor man some help, Ed]