

Social networks are one answer to information overload at work

Workplace

Some companies have found they can function better without internal emails, writes *Jessica Twentyman*

In 2011, Thierry Breton, chief executive at Atos, the information technology services provider, set an ambitious goal for his staff: to give up internal email for good by the end of 2013.

Critics said his efforts were doomed to fail - and, to a certain extent, they were right. Atos did not manage to eliminate internal email by the end of last year. But it did cut volumes by 60 per cent.

More importantly, the "zero email" initiative has got the company's 76,000-plus employees working together in more effective ways, according to a June 2014 report on the project by Anthony Bradley and Samantha Searle, analysts at Gartner, the IT market research firm.

Overcoming big barriers to change sometimes requires drastic actions, they say. Despite the Atos campaign's controversial name, eliminating internal email was never the real goal. That, say Mr Bradley and Ms Searle, was to "move collaboration activities out of email and into a more suitable environment".

In that sense, "zero email" has been a resounding success. As well as the reduction in internal email traffic, Atos now has more than 74,000 staff registered on the social networking platform it owns, blueKiwi. Every month, they create around 300,000 posts on the internal site and view almost 2m pages.

But why does this represent an improvement - and what is the big problem with email, anyway?

According to analysts at strategy house McKinsey, it is partly a matter of productivity. In a 2012 research study, they found that the average "knowledge worker" spends an estimated 28 per cent of the working week reading and responding to email and almost 20 per cent searching for internal information or tracking down colleagues who can help with specific tasks.

"But when companies use social media internally, messages become content; a searchable record of knowledge can reduce - by as much as 35 per cent - the time employees spend searching for company information," the McKinsey researchers write.



Staff email ban: Compton Green

Time spent dealing with email, they add, is typically slashed by between 25 and 30 per cent.

There are other problems, too, says Nikos Drakos, a Gartner analyst. "From a worker's perspective, email is probably still the best mechanism for focused conversations between small groups of participants working together towards a specific goal," he says. "But from an organisation's perspective, a great deal of valuable knowledge and content can get hidden or buried in individual email accounts and may be lost forever when an employee leaves the company."

Nor does email do a good job of prioritising issues or allocating tasks, says Mr Drakos, when forwarded and "carbon-copied" messages bounce backwards and forwards between large groups of employees.

This can lead to chaos, says Adrian Butera, director of Compton Green, a real estate company based in Melbourne, Australia: "For us, email had become too busy, too distracting. There was too much clutter, too many 'reply alls'. But the worst thing for me was that we were sometimes missing customer emails among all the internal ones."

Radical action was called for, he says. This involved a blanket ban on internal emails and the rollout of an enterprise social network, based on the tibbr platform from Tibco Software.

That, Mr Butera decided, would enable Compton Green's sales associates out

in the field to work together more effectively on the marketing and sale of properties.

Persuading Compton Green's staff of the benefits of this approach was not as difficult as Mr Butera had feared.

"The average age of employee in our firm is 30 and there was an instant understanding and appreciation of the idea of a 'Facebook for work'," Mr Butera says.

Today, some eight months after the internal social network went live, anyone who is even tempted to revert to internal email to contact a colleague can expect a backlash.

"It's quite funny," says Mr Butera. "You see an immediate response from recipients: 'I'm not reading this. You need to tibbr it.'"

At Archant, a UK-based publishing house, meanwhile, employees have taken the lead in setting up groups on the company's four-year-old Connect social network, says Chris Thompson, the company's head of development. This is based on the Socialcast platform from VMware.

Archant's accounts department, for example, used email for many years to make sure that regional sales executives were chasing outstanding payments from their clients. Now, there is an accounts payable group on the Connect network, where details of outstanding payments are posted.

"It's not supposed to be a name-and-shame exercise," says Mr Thompson, "but having a product code up there and the name of the person responsible for that code is an incentive [for them] to make sure that money comes in on time."

There are also travel groups, where Archant employees can post reviews of places where they have stayed or eaten on work trips, and a popular photography group, where keen amateur snappers can share their latest images.

Another group focuses specifically on Archant's content management system, providing a repository of information, advice and documentation for those using the publishing tool in their day-to-day work.

"All in all, it's more effective than email for the whole company to share important messages with each other, whether those are work-related or more social in nature," says Mr Thompson.

"And because employees have found their own uses for the platform, they get better value from it, too."