Slide 1

Taking Control of Email

Devin Vodicka, Ed.D.
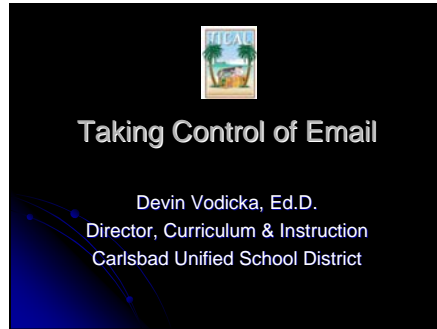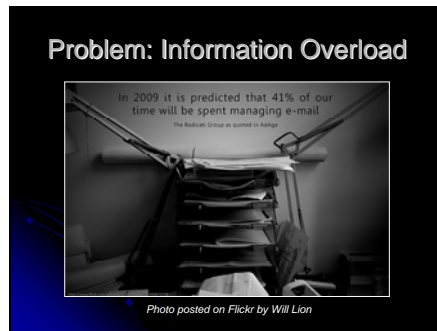Director, Curriculum & Instruction
Carlsbad Unified School District

Hello. This is Devin Vodicka, Director of Curriculum and Instruction from Carlsbad Unified School District in San Diego County. This Quick take will provide a sequence of steps and offer resources that will help school leaders to take control of email, increase their efficiency, and improve their effectiveness.

Slide 2

Problem: Information Overload

In 2009 it is predicted that 41% of our time will be spent managing e-mail

The Radicati Group as quoted in AdAge

Photo posted on Flickr by Will Lion

School leaders spend far too much time and effort dealing with emails.

The Wikipedia entry on Information Overload states that *E-mail remains a major source of information overload, as people struggle to keep up with the rate of incoming messages. As well as filtering out unsolicited commercial messages (spam), users also have to contend with the growing use of e-mail attachments in the form of lengthy reports, presentations and media files. A December 2007 New York Times blog post described E-mail as "a $650 Billion Drag on the Economy," and the New York Times reported in April 2008 that "E-MAIL has become the bane of some people's professional lives" due to information overload.*

Additionally, The Radicati Group points out that "in 2006, the average corporate e-mail user received 126 e-mail messages per day, an increase of 55% since 2002." If trends continue,

they estimate that knowledge workers will spend up to 41% of their day just dealing with email. (*Radicati Report, 2006*)
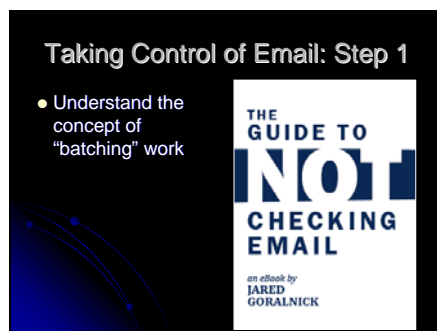
Slide 3

My Story
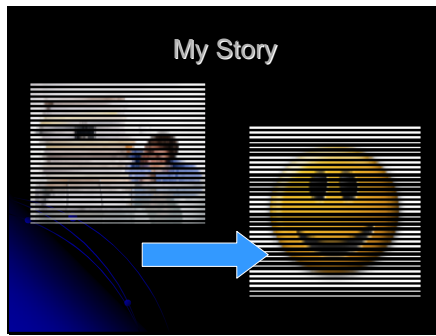
As a proponent for technology and an advocate for sharing information, I found myself caught in the downward spiral of trying to keep pace with multiple email accounts and immediate attempts to respond to hundreds of incoming messages every day. Using the steps and resources from the following slides, I have been able to significantly reduce the amount of time that I spend on email, increasing my effectiveness and reducing my own stress levels. Based on my experience, I feel compelled to share this simple process with others.

Slide 4
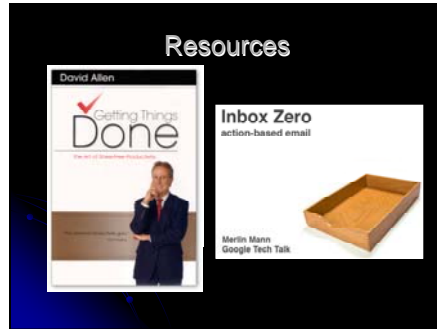
The first resource that opened my thinking regarding managing email was a book by David Allen called Getting Things Done. This book includes a sequence of steps to manage any incoming information and also includes specific information related to email. It was the first time management book that I had encountered which included tips and tricks related specifically to email functions. After being inspired by the idea that I needed a systematic approach to sorting, responding, and managing my email, I did some online research, watched the Google Tech Talk from Merlin Mann on "Inbox Zero" and then went to work restructuring my approach.

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The next few slides draw from an excellent (and free) download of a brief, 26 page, eBook from Jared Goralnick entitled "The Guide to Not Checking Email." This download is available through awayfind.com …

The first step in this process is to understand the concept of "batching" your work.
Your effectiveness, focus, and energy will improve if you are not continually interrupting your workflow by attempting to respond right away to incoming emails. Set aside a block of time each day to dedicate your attention to email. Some school leaders have told me that they prefer to wait until students have settled into classes before they check their email. I prefer to

check and sort email first thing in the morning and then devote block of time later in the day to respond to longer and more time-consuming emails.

Slide 6
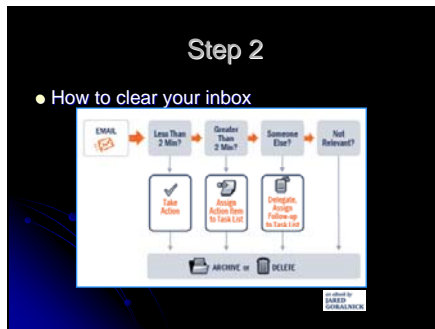
Step 2 in the process describes what you do when you actually go through your email during the block of time that you have dedicated for this purpose. I should be clear in stating that this sequence is designed to work in conjunction with a broader system of calendaring time, maintaining personal task lists, and keeping track of "follow-up" items that have been delegated to others.

This graphic, from Goralnick's ebook, is very similar to the workflow proposed in Getting Things Done. The first decision you need to make when you read an email is whether you can respond to the email in less than two minutes. If yes, do it!. Then either archive the message by moving it to a dedicated "archive" folder or simply delete the message. The decision to archive or delete is probably dependent on your storage limitations.

If it will take more than two minutes to respond to the message, you need to decide who is the best person to deal with the matter. If that's you, assign the item to your task list to take care of at a later time. If someone else is in a better position to handle the message, delegate it and keep track of the task on your follow up task list.

Finally, if the message is not relevant to you, archive or delete the message immediately. Do not let these

http://www.portical.org/Presentations/vodicka/#email

messages clutter your inbox. This clutter distracts you from the real and important work that is demanded of school leaders today.

By implementing this process, your "inbox" will be reduced to zero messages each time you sit down to process your email. Your task list and follow-up list may grow, but you decide at a later time how and when to accomplish those tasks. This results in a profound shift. Instead of your incoming email becoming your de facto task list, you now are in control of the who, the what, and the when decisions that influence your daily schedules and therefore impact your productivity, effectiveness, and personal satisfaction.

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Step 3 focuses on reducing incoming messages that add to the email clutter that most of us face on a daily basis. Many of us have at one time or another set up accounts for various services that include frequent email updates. Many of us have also found that these email updates do not add value or productivity and instead simply create a routine chore of deleting or archiving incoming messages that are not important or relevant to what we are trying to achieve. I have found that unsubscribing to those email updates has been an excellent step that has saved me time, distractions, and interruptions in the long haul.
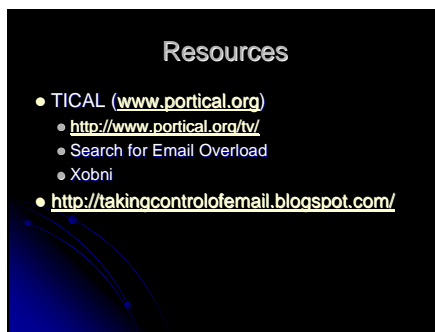
Many email systems also have pop-up "notifications" or sound alerts when we receive messages. If we are committed to the concept of batching our work and not allowing ourselves to be interrupted by these incoming emails we should turn off these alerts. I have found that this improves my workflow and enhances my ability to attend to other tasks.

Most email systems also provide the option to create filters and rules that will automatically sort incoming messages. For example, you can set a rule in Outlook that will place incoming messages from the Superintendent at

http://www.portical.org/Presentations/vodicka/#email

the top of your inbox. Descriptions of how to create these rules and/or filters can be found in Goralnick's eBook.

Finally, I have facilitated my transition to this different approach to email by creating an opportunity for others to contact me via text message on my cell phone … While I transitioned away from attempting to respond immediately, I created an autoresponse email that indicated that I was trying to devote blocks of time to email instead of quickly responding. The autoresponse included a link to awayfind with instructions that they could use this option to reach me with any urgent items. In the six months I have been using this, only two times have others taken advantage of this option.

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Resources

- TICAL (www.portical.org)
  - http://www.portical.org/tv/
  - Search for Email Overload
  - Xobni
- http://takingcontrolofemail.blogspot.com/

In conclusion, I hope that you will consider implementing a different approach to managing email, review these resources, and find ways to improve your effectiveness, productivity, and personal satisfaction. Please check the TICAL website for additional ideas and inspiration, including an excellent video of Principal Jack Jarvis discussing his approach to managing email on portical.org/tv. Xobni is another resource currently profiled through TICAL that looks to hold some promise.

Finally, please also check the blog, takingcontrolofemail.blogspot.com, for links to additional resources and to connect as we continue on this journey. Good luck!