

# How Long Email Chains Can Make Us Frustrated— and Less Competent

A new study suggests an extended back and forth can hurt your performance on subsequent tasks



After a lengthy email exchange, ‘Not only do you have less motivation, but you also suffer cognitive deficits,’ a researcher says. Illustration: Luca D’Urbino

By [Anne Kadet](#) in the Wall Street Journal

It’s no secret that resolving complicated issues over email can feel frustrating and taxing. But the cost of email reliance may be more far-reaching than previously known. New [research](#) suggests that compared with face-to-face conversation, email not only makes resolution more difficult, but can also worsen one’s performance on subsequent tasks.

“Not only do you have less motivation, but you also suffer cognitive deficits,” says Ravi Gajendran, the study’s lead author.

Dr. Gajendran, an associate professor of management at Florida International University, says the research was prompted by his own experience.

“I hate these long back-and-forth emails,” he says. “I had a colleague who, if you started engaging on email, would write literally essays in response, and then you would have to respond with another essay. And that back-and-forth really tired me.”

Curious to measure the toll this might be taking on his own efficiency, he and his colleagues devised four experiments in which hundreds of paired subjects were divided into two groups. In each experiment, the first group was asked to perform a complicated task in a face-to-face encounter. The second group was asked to perform an identical task using Gmail.

Not surprisingly, the pairs working face-to-face were more efficient. In the first experiment, for example, dyads negotiating a sales strategy in person took six minutes on average to achieve consensus, while the emailing pairs took 20 minutes on average.

Dr. Gajendran says email is a great tool for sending information. But when you need to arrive at a shared understanding, face-to-face communication works a lot better.

The study also showed that the participants who resolved issues over email performed worse on subsequent tasks. Asked to spot grammatical errors in a news story about young entrepreneurs, for example, the email communicators—now working as individuals—caught 19% fewer errors than those who had communicated face-to-face. The emailing communicators also did 49% worse solving a series of logic problems, and 20% worse on a test of complex reasoning.

The researchers concluded their study with a field test that compiled data from employees in real work situations. They asked more than 100 employed adults to report their daily levels of text-based communication in an end-of-the morning survey, along with their daily goal progress and work engagement at the end of the day.

These results showed that while a big dose of text-based communication had no effect on those working in jobs with low problem-solving demands, people working in jobs with high problem-solving demands felt less excited and energetic about their work at the day's end—and were less likely to report feeling they had made progress.

Dr. Gajendran says that email creates a record of the conversation, and often feels easier than trying to schedule a meeting—especially when people are working remotely or in different time zones. “Sometimes I’d rather just type an email and get it off my desk,” he says.

But people often use email simply out of habit, he adds, without considering the hidden costs. He recommends as an alternative scheduling regular meetings so that outstanding issues can be resolved with less effort.

And when caught in a nightmare email chain, he says, be mindful of the toll it extracts before moving on to the next task.

“You might want to take a break, or do something that’s not important,” says Dr. Gajendran, “something that’s relatively mindless compared to something that involves a lot of decision making.”

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