

column

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Paul Allen started Infobases, MyFamily.com, and 10x Marketing. He currently runs business incubator Provo Labs. He has taught at UVSC and BYU and he blogs at www.infobaseventures.com/blog.



i'm all thumbs

I'm at the Salt Lake airport, writing my column on my Blackberry using only my thumbs.

I almost finished it yesterday, sitting at my computer using all 10 of my digits. But in my rush to get to the airport, I forgot to e-mail my column to myself, so now I have to start over.

My **connect** editors are used to two things: I'm always late, and I always go over my 800-word limit. But this time, I might actually keep it short. It's harder to be verbose when working on such a small screen.

My thumbs are flying (I've been clocked at speeds of 55 words per minute). It's my core competency. I'm calling Lloyds of London to take out an insurance policy on my thumbs, like models do on their legs.

It used to be an insult to say that someone was "all thumbs." Now it's a compliment of the highest order. Many of the smartest and most effective businesspeople I know are all thumbs.

Mark Andreessen, the legendary creator of Netscape, held up his Blackberry at a conference in 2000 and said it had become his sole e-mail client. He predicted then (I am a witness) that humans would evolve smaller thumbs since this device is so important in today's "survival of the fittest."

David Neeleman of JetBlue is definitely a Blackberry (some people call it a "Crackberry") addict. So is Alan Hall, CEO of MarketStar. And my FundingUniverse partner David Bradford is now an e-mail-from-anywhere kind of guy.

All of these guys are incredibly effective businesspeople. Their e-mails are always brief and to the point. I give all of them two thumbs up.

Strangely, no matter how much I rave about my Blackberry, I have had a hard time convincing many of my business partners and employees to even try it. So I'm going to take a different approach. I'm going to insult all the dinosaurs who use traditional, desktop e-mail.

What I see happening to individuals and corporations that are e-mail slaves is scary. I know people who used to

be creative, outgoing, personable and effective. Now they are e-mail zombies tethered to desktop machines. E-mail overload is sucking their life away. Every day they drive to work, go into their office or cubicle and sit for hours at a time, reading and sending scores of e-mails.

E-mail overload means you don't have time to read the best books, you don't have time to network with the smartest people, and you don't have time to imagine and create.

Ask yourself, "Have I become an e-mail zombie? Am I enslaved by what used to be a tool that made me more effective? Does my spirit yearn to be freed from e-mail prison?"

Using a Blackberry is one way I deal with e-mail overload. It buys me an extra hour or two per day of productivity. I snatch a few minutes many times a day to stay caught up.

But there are other liberating tools that are reducing my e-mail overload. Here are a few:

Online "To Do" Lists

Tadalist.com is a great free service that lets me share "to do" lists with my team. Instead of exchanging 10 e-mails a day with my assistant, I can check her "to do" list at any time and see what she has completed and what she is working on next.

Blogs

Because I blog almost daily, people I work with know what I'm up to and what I consider important without me having to e-mail them. I also read blogs. More and more of my partners, employees and business friends are blogging, giving me more chances to know what they're up to and less reason to e-mail.

RSS

Unsubscribe from all the e-mail newsletters you used to read and instead access all the great content through RSS, where you are in complete control of what comes to you.

Use Wikis

I taught Internet marketing at BYU this year and had 50 students. At first I asked them to e-mail their assignments to me. Big mistake. I couldn't handle 50 new e-mails a week. Then we set up Blackboard (a course management system) for their personal assignments and a Wiki for their team projects.

No more e-mail for me. I also use Wikis so a team of people can collaborate on a document in real time, instead of e-mailing a Word document and each taking a crack at it in turn.

Blackberry

Get everyone you know to use a Blackberry. Instead of cumbersome, long e-mails that cover a hundred issues and have lots of attachments, you'll start getting short and sweet e-mails that say things like, "Yup," "Sounds great" and "How bout tomorrow at 2?"

One Utah CEO told me the other day that he often doesn't reply to his e-mails because he gets way too many. He hopes that over time, e-mail etiquette will evolve so that people don't really expect you to read and reply to everything.

I guess ignoring e-mail is one way to deal with the problem.

One of my favorite ideas that I believe Jakob Nielsen came up with to solve e-mail overload is to adopt technology that gives tokens (permission to send you e-mail) to your family and friends but sells tokens to everyone else. You could charge anything from a penny (which would eliminate spam) to \$10 or more for reading an e-mail from someone you don't know. Maybe you could even auction off your tokens.

I like this idea because time is money. If e-mail is sucking away our free time, then someone should find a way to charge people for sending us e-mails requiring a reply.

Until that silver-bullet solution to e-mail overload arrives, I invite you to decide now to free yourself from the e-mail chains that bind you.

It's easy to escape — all it takes is your thumbs. 

We wanted to do a clever ad, but we're too busy producing results for our clients.

Find out why leading companies like Motorola, Zero Halliburton, Iomega & Deer Valley use a Salt Lake company for interactive advertising and design.

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