

How to Manage Your Email
Before It Manages You

THE HAMSTER REVOLUTION

Stop Info Glut—Reclaim Your Life!



Mike Song, Vicki Halsey & Tim Burress

Foreword by Ken Blanchard

an excerpt from

***The Hamster Revolution:
How to Manage Your Email Before It Manages You***

by Mike Song, Vickey Halsey, and Tim Burrell
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Contents

Foreword	xi
1 Confessions of an Info-Hamster	1
2 A New Way to Work	5
3 Email Adds Up!	11
4 Strategy 1: Reduce Email Volume	17
5 A Tale of Two Emails	35
6 Strategy 2: Improve Email Quality	41
7 Strategy 3: Info-Coaching Sustains Results	53
8 Help! It's Not So Easy!	65
9 Harold's Progress Check	69
10 Chaos in Info-Land	73
11 Strategy 4: File and Find It Fast With COTA	81
12 A Blue Sky Wrap Up	97
Epilogue	105
Appendix 1: Fast Answers for Busy Hamsters	107
Appendix 2: Case Study: Capital One's Email Efficiency Solution	113
Notes	119
Acknowledgements	120
Index	122
Services Available	126
About the Authors	128

Foreword

Every once in awhile, the business world teeters off balance. This usually happens when events converge to create an absurd situation or *incongruity*. Invariably, an *incongruity* is a big opportunity. In the 1980s, the *incongruity* was that managers lacked a simple system for managing people. When the rubber met the road, most lacked the people skills needed to maximize performance. Along came *The One Minute Manager*[®] and suddenly millions of professionals had a book that *simplified the management of people*. Twenty years later, I'm thrilled that it continues to help managers manage and leaders lead.

In the 1990s, the *incongruity* was that people lacked a simple strategy for managing change. This was absurd because the '90s were a time of great upheaval in the business world. Along came Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?*[®] and suddenly millions of professionals had a book that *simplified the management of change*.

Today, the *incongruity* is that you're asked to process more information, particularly email, than is humanly possible. Each day you multitask your way through an avalanche of disorganized, unstructured information. It's a stressful world filled with uncertainty and interruptions. That said, I have some very good news. Just when you need it most, along comes *The Hamster Revolution* with four highly effective strategies for *simplifying the management of information*.

You'll love this book for three reasons:

- 1. It Works:** *The Hamster Revolution* contains practical and proven insights that will make you more effective the next time you sit down at your computer.
- 2. It's a Valuable Guide for Leaders:** Email now consumes a quarter of the day for the typical professional. If you aspire to be a great leader or team player, you have to develop a strategy for managing email. *The Hamster Revolution* provides clear guidance on how to do just that.
- 3. It's Fast and Fun:** Let me guess—you're busy, right? Sometimes you barely have time to think, let alone read a long book filled with thousands of tips. Relax. You can read this book in about 90 minutes. The authors focus on "a *small number of high-impact* email insights." You're going to smile when you meet the book's star: Harold. He's a funny guy and in some ways, he'll remind you... of you.

I'd like to congratulate you for being here, right now in this moment. You've envisioned something that many of your colleagues and competitors have yet to discover: *You can't unlock your fullest potential when you and your team are drowning in email.* It's time to address the *incongruity* of email overload. It's time for the next big revolution to begin. So cue the lights and quiet on the set. Here comes Harold and *The Hamster Revolution!*

Ken Blanchard
Co-author, *The One Minute Manager*®

1

CONFESSIONS OF AN INFO-HAMSTER

I was working peacefully in my office when the door slowly opened and shut with a click. I looked up but no one was there. “You’d better be able to help me!” said a small voice. *Was this a joke?*

I stood up and *that’s* when I saw him. Trudging across the floor, tugging on his tie, was a small, nervous-looking white hamster with brown spots. He was wearing a dark blue business suit and carrying a small black briefcase. He looked tired and defeated.

“I hear you’re the so-called productivity expert,” he said. “I’m Harold.”

I leaned down to shake his paw, “Pleased to meet you, Harold. And yes, my passion is helping professionals lead more productive and fulfilling lives.”

Harold raised his eyes hopefully. “Maybe I’m in the right place after all,” he muttered.

Once I'd gotten over my initial shock that Harold was a hamster, I realized that he was my 1:30 PM appointment.

"Welcome, Harold! Please sit down and tell me what brings you here."

Harold hopped into a chair facing my desk. As he leaned back, his wireless personal digital assistant (PDA) buzzed loudly. Harold looked down at it, lost his balance, and almost fell through the gap in the back of the chair. He scrambled frantically to keep from falling and eventually regained his composure.

"Okay, okay. Here's my story. Five years ago, I landed my dream job: Human Resources Director at Foster and Schrubbs Financial. At first, the position was perfect. I was incredibly productive and my team launched several big initiatives." Harold frowned and shifted in his seat, "But a couple of years ago, I noticed that I was working harder and harder and getting less and less done."

"How'd that feel?"

"Am I in analysis or something?" quipped Harold, rolling his eyes. "Well, Dr. Freud, I felt stressed. I was getting buried alive by email, voice mail, and meeting notes. I had information coming out of my ears."

Harold pointed at the PDA clipped to his belt. "Then I got this thing. At first I liked being connected 24-7, but soon I fell even further behind and..."

"Yes?"

"To make matters worse," Harold said softly as he picked at some loose fur on his wrist, "and this is embarrassing to admit," he leaned forward and whispered, "Lately, I'm having trouble finding stuff."

I leaned forward and whispered, "What kind of *stuff*, Harold?"

“Well, I’ll store an email and when I really need it — I can’t find it! Things just vaporize! And don’t get me started on my team’s shared storage drive; everyone’s storing documents differently; no one knows how to clean it up; it’s a mess! I spend a lot of time requesting resends and recreating documents that are missing. I’m staying late just to keep up.”

“So work is spilling over into your personal life?”

Harold raised his furry eyebrows thoughtfully. He reached into his pocket and produced an impossibly small picture. I squinted and saw that it was Harold’s family: a lovely wife and two beautiful children.

“Nice family.”

“Upset family,” corrected Harold wearily. “Thanks to wireless technology, I’m always online. Carol’s really frustrated with the amount of time I spend working after-hours.”

He held up his paws with an exasperated look. “The kids hate it when I do email on Saturday or Sunday. But part of me actually looks forward to weekends just so I can catch up on work. Sometimes, I miss a soccer game or dance recital but if I don’t keep up...” Harold shrugged his little hamster shoulders as if to say, *“I just don’t know anymore.”*

“So your dream job’s become a nightmare?”

Harold nodded. “I feel like I’m losing... me.”

He continued quietly, “I used to love learning new things. I was thrilled to get to the office each morning. Now I dread it. I feel like... like...” Harold struggled for the right words.

“Like a hamster on a wheel?” I offered.

“Yes!” shouted Harold, bolting upright in his chair, “I’ve become a *hamster on a wheel!* Running faster and harder, but getting nowhere.”

I suddenly realized that Harold was unaware that he'd actually turned into a hamster. Although I'd helped countless professionals who felt and acted like hamsters, Harold was the first that actually *changed* into one! Apparently his metamorphosis had been so gradual that he hadn't noticed.

Harold paused and let out a deep sigh. "When I was younger, I had a much different vision of how my life would unfold."

"Tell me about that."

Harold raised his eyebrows and stared at the ground. He looked like he was trying to recall a distant memory.

"Well, I dreamed I'd have this really fulfilling job. I pictured myself surrounded by brilliant people working on these high-level, high-impact team projects — exciting stuff, life-changing stuff. I also imagined that I'd have much more time with my family, to laugh with friends, work out, garden, reflect." Harold smiled wryly, "I never thought I'd spend every waking hour stressing over email and feeling like a hamster on a wheel."

2

A NEW WAY TO WORK

Harold raised his paws in frustration. “So you’re the expert. How do I get off the wheel?”

“You fight back, Harold. There’s a better way to work.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said looking tense, “I’ve taken a couple time-management classes, but they didn’t help.”

“Harold, this isn’t a *time*-management problem. It’s an *information*-management problem.”

“It is?”

“Yes! Too much email and information is gushing into your life. Don’t get me wrong; email is an amazing communication tool. But suddenly, it’s keeping a lot of people from getting things done. Most professionals feel like they’re stuck on a nonstop wheel-of-information overwhelm.”

“So what’s the answer?” asked Harold, sounding frustrated.

“Join *The Hamster Revolution*.”

“Huh?” asked Harold looking surprised. “Revolution against what?”

“Info-glut!” I said. “That’s your enemy: way too much low-value information mucking up your world. You can’t reach your fullest potential when you’re drowning in email! *The Hamster Revolution* is a strategic plan that helps you conquer info-glut once and for all. Interested in learning more?”

“Sure,” said Harold, looking both interested and worried at the same time.

I handed Harold a single sheet of paper, “Here’s our schedule.”

The Hamster Revolution Plan

Week 1 (Today): Email Insights (90 Minutes)

Strategy 1: Reduce email volume

Strategy 2: Improve email quality

Strategy 3: Coach others to send you more actionable email

Week 2: Information Storage Insights (60 Minutes)

Strategy 4: File and find info fast with COTA[®]

Week 3: Wrap-Up Meeting (30 Minutes)

Harold studied the schedule and seemed pleased, “Three hours works for me. I don’t have a lot of time for this.”

I nodded. “Today, we’ll focus on streamlining the flow of email through your life. This will help you become more relaxed and effective at work. Sound good?”

“Wonderful, if I could actually do it,” replied Harold cautiously.

“Don’t worry. Our goal today is to concentrate on a *small* number of *high-impact* email insights. By the way, you won’t have to write anything down because each Hamster Revolution strategy will be summarized by an easy-to-use tool.”

“Four strategies and four tools... that’s good,” stated Harold emphatically. “But what exactly is next week’s meeting about? What is COTA?”

“A moment ago you mentioned that you were having trouble finding things?”

“Sure.”

“What if you could file and find all of your email, documents, and links in a flash?”

“That would be a miracle,” said Harold softly.

“I can’t promise you a miracle, but I’ve seen amazing results from people who’ve adopted an organizational system called COTA. COTA is a simple yet effective way to arrange your files and folders. After the COTA session, we’ll give you a week to put all four strategies into practice on the job. During that week, you can call me anytime for coaching or feedback. Okay?”

Harold thought for a moment, “Seems like a workable plan so far.”

We’ll hold a third and final wrap-up meeting to see how you did. We can fine-tune your newly found Hamster Revolution skills and answer any lingering questions.”

Harold leaned forward, “So it’s kind of like a one-two punch? First we get email under control, and then we use this COTA thing to organize my information?”

I nodded. “We’ve discovered that there’s a powerful *connection* between email efficiency and the way you store your info.”

“What kind of connection?”

“Here are just a few examples:

- Reduced email volume means less email to store.
- Clear email subject lines make it easier to relocate stored email.
- A highly effective folder system helps you rapidly file email and documents. This reduces inbox overload.
- Responding to an email requesting info is a lot easier when you can find your info fast.
- There’s also a time connection. Together, email and information storage tasks consume over 40% of a typical professional’s day.^{1, 2} When both of these activities become more efficient, your overall productivity takes a giant leap forward.”

Harold raised his eyebrows. “So I need to improve *both* email and information storage to get off the hamster wheel?”

I nodded. “We’re going to get your life back, Harold.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” said Harold. “But I like your approach. You’re looking at the whole process of managing information, not just email by itself. I’ve never thought of it that way before.”

“You’re not alone. Most professionals lack an effective plan for managing all the information flooding into their lives. To make matters worse, over the past five years, the volume of information we process has skyrocketed. For example, email volume is rising at a rate of 14.6% per year.”³

Harold groaned, “I’m doomed.”

“As inboxes and computer filing systems have become bloated, millions of professionals have begun to feel like hamsters. *Well, it’s time for the hamsters to fight back!* The Hamster Revolution will restore

order and control to your life. Best of all, it will save you 15 days a year.”

Harold looked surprised, “15 days?”

“You can save a lot of time by mastering the flow of information through your world. So what do you think?”

Harold reflected on his predicament for a moment. Suddenly, with a determined look, he blurted, “Okay, I’ll join your Hamster Revolution!”

“*Our* revolution,” I smiled, “Ready to reclaim your life?”

Harold stood up on his chair and gave a mock salute.

“Let the revolting begin!”

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