

an excerpt from

***The Hamster Revolution***

***How to Manage Your Email Before It Manages You***

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Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

# 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 Schrubb 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<sup>®</sup>

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.<sup>1, 2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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!”

## 3

# EMAIL ADDS UP!

As Harold saluted, Emilio, our Senior VP of Finance, walked past my door. His mouth dropped as he spied a tiny, saluting hamster teetering on a chair. He was so distracted that he crashed into a bank of filing cabinets, making a loud noise. Hoping that Harold wouldn't notice, I launched into one of my favorite topics: The True Cost of Email Overload.

"I love coffee, Harold. To be specific, I love Blue Sky mochaccinos, an irresistible blend of coffee, cream, and rich chocolate."

"We have a Blue Sky Café in our building, too," said Harold, looking confused.

"Well, several years ago I noticed that I was buying two or three cups of coffee a day. We were trying to trim the family budget so that we could save for our kids' college education. Just for kicks, I decided to calculate what those mochaccinos were costing me. It was more than \$3,000 a year! Over time, I was literally spending my kids' college tuition on coffee!"

Harold shot me a look that said, “*What does this have to do with email?*”

“Email is a lot like coffee, Harold. It’s kind of addicting and it definitely adds up.”

“Addicting?” asked Harold, looking puzzled.

“Has your email system crashed in the past year?”

Harold nodded. “I did have a problem last month and it felt terrible. I was petrified that I was missing something important and I felt totally cut off from the world. I was really cranky and — looking back — I completely overreacted.”

“The symptoms you describe sound like what I experience when I don’t get coffee for a couple days. Those are feelings of withdrawal, Harold. Email occasionally brings us exciting and important information. Perhaps those emotional highs trigger something in our minds that makes us want to check it all the time.”

“Sometimes I wind up doing email even when I have much more important things to do,” noted Harold.

“Exactly, another reason we default to email is that it’s easy and nonconfrontational. It’s easier to zip off a critical email than it is to conduct a difficult live conversation with a colleague who is underperforming. Don’t get me wrong. Email is a great productivity tool, but we’re overusing it and in some cases — we’re abusing it.”

“Never thought of it that way,” agreed Harold.

“Do you know how much email costs you each year?”

“Well isn’t that the beauty of email? It’s free. No stamps!” smirked Harold.

“We’ll see,” I replied. “How much time do you spend on email each year?”

Harold shook his head, “I have no idea. I guess I get about 50 a day and I probably hit the *Send* button about 25 times.”

I slid a calculator across my desk. “So you send and receive a total of 75 emails per day. Let’s calculate your annual email volume: Multiply your 75 daily emails by 240, which is the number of work days per year. What do you get?”

Harold raised his eyebrows in wonder. “I process 18,000 messages per year? Wow.”

“What else do you do 18,000 times a year?” I asked.

Harold paused, “I don’t know... maybe breathe?”

“Right,” I said, “next to life-sustaining activities, email may be what we do most.”

“Ughhh,” Harold groaned.

“We practically live for email and that’s why we’ve got to do a better job of managing it. How much time do you think you spend on email each day, Harold?”

“I’m not sure, but I would guess at least two and a half hours.”

“So it takes you 150 minutes to process 75 emails a day. That’s an average of 2 minutes per email. Now multiply your 18,000 annual emails by 2 minutes to get the total number of minutes you spend on email each year.”

Harold did the calculations and stared in disbelief, “36,000 minutes per year?”

I nodded and leaned forward. “Now divide by 60 minutes to get the total number of hours you spend on email each year.”

Harold was even more dumbfounded. “600 hours per year? No wonder I can’t get anything done!”

“Now divide by 8 hours to calculate the number of 8-hour workdays you spend on email each year.”

“I spend 75 workdays per year on email? That’s almost four continuous months of email a year! Can that be right?”

Harold was stunned. He did the calculation again and came up with the same number. Looking up he mused, “And this doesn’t even include the email I do during holidays, vacations, and weekends.”

I nodded and paused a moment to let it all sink in. “Let’s cut to the chase, Harold. What percentage of the time that you spend on email is *wasted*?”

“Where do I start?” said Harold with a grimace. “People constantly send me long, unnecessary, and convoluted messages. I get copied on everything. *Reply-to-all* is out of control.”

Harold paused to calm down and then blurted, “At least a third of the time I spend on email is poorly utilized or wasted!”

I nodded. “If you spend 75 days a year on email and a third of that time is wasted...”

Harold looked up in amazement. “Then I’m wasting 25 days a year on email?”

“That’s more than a month of your career up in smoke each year. Using an average salary of \$30 per hour, the cost of 25 wasted days is roughly \$6,000 per worker each year or \$6,000,000 for a company with 1,000 employees!”<sup>4</sup>

Slowly Harold reasoned, “So email isn’t free at all. In fact, it’s one of the *most* expensive things we do at Foster and Schrubbs.”

“And yet, you’ve received little or no guidance on how to manage it effectively,” I guessed.

“That’s true,” said Harold quietly. At that moment, I noticed a change sweep over Harold’s face. Suddenly, he looked more present and energetic.

Harold shot me a determined look. “Okay, Coach, teach me how to get my time back.”

I grinned and said, “Okay. Now let’s see — our goal is to reduce your annual email processing time by 20%. Because you spend 75 days a year on email, this equates to a savings of approximately 15 days. To achieve this goal, you’ll need to change the way you think about email. Are you prepared to make some changes and leave your comfort zone, Harold?”

“I’ll leave the planet to get back 15 days!” stated Harold firmly.

<b>How Much Time Could You Save By Reducing Email by 20%?</b>			
<b>Emails Sent and Received Each Day</b>	<b>Annual Emails</b>	<b>Days Spent on Email</b>	<b>Days Saved with 20% Reduction</b>
20	4,800	20	4
30	7,200	30	6
40	9,600	40	8
50	12,200	50	10
60	14,400	60	12
70	16,800	70	14
80	19,200	80	16
90	21,600	90	18
100	24,000	100	20

“Good,” I smiled. “One more thing, Harold. How will you spend those 15 days?”

Harold thought for a moment, “Hmmm. Not sure...”

I pushed a paper and pen across the table. “Take a moment and write down two important things you’d like to accomplish with 15 extra days over the next 12 months. Basically, 15 days a year equates to two and a half hours a week. Choose one personal and one professional goal. If you don’t create a concrete plan for the time you’ll save, you’ll just wind up running harder and faster on the wheel.”

“I’ll default to email,” acknowledged Harold. He thought for a moment and then wrote:

- *Personal: Take Kyle to karate two nights a week.*
- *Professional: Implement Accountability Training Program.*

Harold and I took a moment to discuss his goals. Apparently his 8-year-old son Kyle had been struggling with his grades and a certain bully at school. Kyle had expressed an interest in martial arts, but Harold, busy as always, hadn’t followed up. As Harold discussed his son’s struggles, I sensed that spending more time with him could make a big difference.

Harold also explained that Foster and Schrubb needed to develop a training program that promoted accountability. As the company had grown, lines of responsibility had become fuzzy. Many of Harold’s co-workers failed to take ownership for key projects and decisions. Internal and external client satisfaction was dropping each quarter. Ironically, Harold had been tasked with creating an accountability program, but he had failed to follow through.

“I just couldn’t find the time,” he shrugged.

“I like your goals,” I said. “They’re realistic and attainable. Let me double-check something with you. Do they motivate you? Will you build them into your schedule in order to make them happen?”

“Absolutely,” said Harold with conviction.

**Reader Exercise:** What personal and professional goals could you accomplish by joining the Hamster Revolution?

Hamster Revolution Goals	
Goal	Type of Goal
1.	Personal
2.	Professional

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