



## Research Report

# When email use gets out of control: Understanding the relationship between personality and email overload and their impact on burnout and work engagement



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## ABSTRACT

Research on email overload has mainly focused on email-related predictors and on linking it to stress and productivity. However, only few studies have considered personality traits to explain email overload and no studies to date have examined burnout and work engagement as potential consequences. Hence, this study was conducted ( $N = 201$ ) to test to which extent Core Self-Evaluations, the Big Five traits and ambition predict email overload beyond email-related predictors. Moreover, the relationship between email overload and burnout/work engagement was examined. Results show that Core Self-Evaluations predict email overload beyond other personality traits and email-related measures. Second, high feelings of email overload and low Core Self-Evaluations are suggested to contribute to higher levels of burnout and low work engagement, beyond other personality traits and control variables. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. This study demonstrated the importance of personality, in particular of Core Self-Evaluations, to explain email overload. Moreover, it strongly indicates that email overload is not only related to productivity but also to burnout and work engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

Email communication has become an essential part of organisational life. In fact, it was found that about 28% of an average work week is spent on reading and responding to emails (McKinsey Global Institute et al., 2012). Although emails were originally thought to enable quick communication and increase productivity (Derks & Bakker, 2010), there is a raising concern today that for some employees, the use of email gets out of control: This perception of an individual to be unable to find, cope with or process his/her emails effectively was defined as the feeling of *email overload* (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Sevinc & D'Ambra, 2010). Email overload may in turn have negative effects on well-being and performance by increasing stress levels and impeding productivity (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Mark, Vaida, & Cardello, 2012). Therefore, it appears to be a highly relevant phenomenon for organisations.

Previous research has primarily focused on explaining email overload by looking at email-related antecedents such as email volume. However, the definition of email overload implies that it occurs when someone *perceives* his/her emails to be more than

the individual can handle (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006). This strongly suggests that individual differences may play an important role for explaining email overload, too. Surprisingly, the impact of personality has rather been neglected in email overload research. Moreover, whilst previous studies have linked email communication to stress and productivity, there is reason to expect that email overload may be related to burnout which is often regarded as a form of work-related stress (Best, Stapleton, & Downey, 2005; Lee & Ashforth, 1996) and also to work engagement which can be considered as the positive antipode of burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). However, no previous research has to the author's knowledge linked these constructs yet. The aim of the present study thus was to address these gaps. In the following, we provide a comprehensive literature review and introduce relevant concepts as well as research hypotheses. We then present and discuss the results of our study that investigates the relationship between email overload, personality and burnout/work engagement.

## 2. When email use gets out of control: Antecedents of email overload and its potential adverse consequences

In order to determine relevant factors that may have an impact on email overload, we first present a literature review on anteced-

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ents of email overload, distinguishing between email-related predictors and personality traits. Afterwards, we examine potential consequences of email overload. Finally, research hypotheses are derived from the literature review.

### 2.1. Antecedents of email overload

Several studies have examined potential email-related predictors of email overload. Hereby, the perceived importance of email communication to get one's work done (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006) as well as email volume were found to significantly increase email overload and email-related stress (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Jerejian, Reid, & Rees, 2013; Sumecki, Chipulu, & Ojiako, 2011). Furthermore, email access and organisational norms about availability may predict email overload: The issue of staying connected 24/7 and its potential detrimental consequences are more and more discussed, also against the background of communication overload (Derks & Bakker, 2010; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). Moreover, organisational expectations about responsiveness were found to be positively associated with work-related technological communication outside working hours (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Fenner & Renn, 2010) and may thus also contribute to feelings of email overload and stress (Barley et al., 2011; Derks & Bakker, 2010).

Aside from looking at email-related antecedents of email overload, Hair, Renaud, and Ramsay (2007) are some of the few researchers who explored the relationship of two personality traits, self-esteem and locus of control, with email stress. Results showed that low self-esteem was associated with a feeling of not being in control of emails which in turn was found to be positively related to perceiving emails as stressing. However, when looking at direct relationships, neither self-esteem nor locus of control was found to be significantly correlated with email stress (Hair et al., 2007). Nonetheless, another study that took up this approach found self-esteem to be significantly related to email overload, such that individuals with high self-esteem were less likely to perceive email overload. The positive relationship between external locus of control and email overload was not significant though (Sevinc & D'Ambra, 2010).

Another study examined the relationship between the trait worry and email stress. The results indicated that worry positively predicted email stress (Jerejian et al., 2013). Hereby, it may further be interesting to examine the relation of email overload and not only worry but neuroticism as one of the five robust and established factors of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991), especially because worry is argued to be linked to and to be a manifestation of neuroticism (Muris, Roelofs, Rassin, Franken, & Mayer, 2005). Besides, neuroticism may be a highly relevant indicator for email overload as it is suggested to be positively related to stress (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993; McCrae, 1990) and work overload (Hudek-Knezevic, Maglica, & Krapic, 2011).

Hence, it can be inferred that self-esteem, locus of control and worry/neuroticism may be relevant predictors of email overload. However, there is only little empirical evidence and the correlations for each individual trait with email overload or email stress were rather weak to moderate (Hair et al., 2007; Jerejian et al., 2013; Sevinc & D'Ambra, 2010). Interestingly, it was shown that the traits self-esteem, locus of control and neuroticism can, together with generalised self-efficacy, be united into one scale which measures a broad personality construct. This construct refers to bottom-line evaluations that individuals held about themselves and was therefore called *Core Self-Evaluations* (CSE; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). Thus, CSE may be a highly relevant and even more important predictor of email overload, especially since CSE as one construct was found to predict organisational outcomes (e.g. job performance) better than its four underlying individual traits (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003).

Apart from the studies mentioned above, there are barely empirical findings about the relationship between email overload and other personality traits. Including the Big Five traits extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience and agreeableness in this study, which are the five robust and established factors of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991), may help to illuminate these relationships. Moreover, ambition may theoretically be related to email overload, as ambitious employees were found to be more likely to use work-related communication technologies after hours (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007).

### 2.2. Potential consequences of email overload

Several studies examined the impact of email communication on stress and productivity. For example, it was found that emails contributed to exhaustion and thus to higher levels of stress by leading to longer working hours and blurring off boundaries between work and leisure time (Barley et al., 2011). A study that compared employees' stress levels on usual working days, measured by heart rate, to stress levels on working days in which participants were cut off their email access found that employees experienced less stress when they had no email access. Furthermore, the results showed that their task focus, measured by computer log data, was significantly higher when they were cut off their email access compared to the baseline measure, indicating higher productivity without email access (Mark et al., 2012). This is in line with other studies that found email and technology overload to negatively impact productivity (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010; Sevinc & D'Ambra, 2010) which may be due to the numerous work interruptions that incoming emails cause (Barley et al., 2011; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2001).

However, although email communication has been linked to productivity and stress before, no studies to date have explored whether email overload may contribute to one specific form of work-related stress, that is, burnout and its potential antipode work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Burnout can be conceptualised as "a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 399). It can also be described as the result of a misfit between an employee's job resources and job demands, as suggested in the framework of the job demands-resources model (JD-R model, Fig. 1) of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R model hereby suggests that burnout is developed by two processes: First, extreme job demands such as high work pressure may lead to a decrease of an employee's energy and finally result into exhaustion. Exhaustion hence is described as the consequence of extreme affective, physical and cognitive strain. Second, a lack of job resources, which refer to aspects of the job that help to achieve goals and reduce the impact of job demands, e.g. social support, may further impede meeting job demands. This is suggested to lead to withdrawal behaviour and in the long-term to disengagement from work, which implies developing negative attitudes towards one's work and distancing oneself from work (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001). The model was supported in several studies (Alarcon, 2011; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Demerouti et al., 2001).

Work engagement is considered as the positive antipode of burnout by several researchers (Demerouti et al., 2001, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). It is defined here as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295), attended with high levels of dedication to work and high energy (Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010).

Examining the antecedents of burnout and work engagement becomes particularly important since they were found to be related to important occupational outcomes including organisational commitment (Demerouti et al., 2010), job dissatisfaction,

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