

The Electronic Ark



“The Electronic Ark is the perfect solution to getting your email under control and boosting efficiency in business.”

Mike Southon, Financial Times columnist and best-selling business author

*“We have implemented many of the techniques from *The Electronic Ark* and we have seen the benefits in communication, efficiency, team spirit, a reduction in conflicts and simply making our unit more successful, and a better place to do business.”*

Dr Michael Elwell, Global Research Director, Huntsman Advanced Materials

Also by Andy Habermacher and coming shortly:

The Story of Dr Fox – How to listen to the wrong person.

Talent Blindness – How corporations continually fail to spot talent (the myth of talent wars).

The Amygdala Syndrome – Why politicians are useless and voters don't have a clue (apart from you).

The Electronic Ark

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Quick Start Guide

1. Communication

1.1. Think about:

Who you are writing to

Why you are writing

What you want to say

1.2. Keep it short and simple

1.3. Keep your emails structured and human

2. Management

2.1. Set fixed times to work with your email

2.2. Avoid using email (other electronic devices) during fixed tasks

2.3. Use your fixed times to answer small emails. Plan big tasks into closed lists

3. Efficiency

3.1. Time yourself

3.2. Increase your cruising speed

3.3. Plan your time

Typical Day

Is this your Typical day?

You walk into the office at, say, 08:30, say hello to a few people and make your way to your desk. You deposit your things, switch on your PC and go off and make a coffee or tea or get a cold drink.

You get back to your desk at say, 08:45, and start opening up your programmes. Outlook opens up, or whatever your email client is (Outlook is pretty standard). It starts downloading your emails into your inbox, which already has 128 unanswered emails – you have 56 new emails (totalling 184 unanswered – many people have more!). You browse through them, read a couple, fire off some short answers and delete some obvious ones to be deleted.

Leaving 142 emails still to be dealt with. You notice an important message on a project so you call up the project leader and have a talk through some issues.

It is now 09:30 you notice and your team meeting is due to start – you quickly tell the project leader you will get back to him and run off to your team meeting arriving a few minutes late (like everybody else).

Your meeting overshoots by 15 minutes and after a quick chat on a pressing topic you get back to your desk at 11:05. In the meantime another 17 emails have come in. You flick through them and answer one that needed an answer. You then get a call from your boss asking for a status report and you give him some figures and explain why everything else hasn't been finished so far. 15 minutes later you put the phone down go to look at your inbox and get another phone call from a client who has a query – you spend another 10 minutes speaking to the client. As you put the phone down you see an urgent email come in requesting figures. You know the figures so you fire off this email. It's now 11:50

and lunch is approaching fast – you therefore decide not to get into any juicy work and start going through your inbox – another 5 emails have come in in the meantime. You start on one but need to check the data – then you remember you didn't call the project leader back so you get on the phone to him apologise for not getting back earlier and start discussing with him. As you're speaking another important email comes in and your start trying to answer it while speaking to your project leader.

It is now 12:22 you decide to go off for lunch and vow to get through those emails after lunch when it should be quiet...

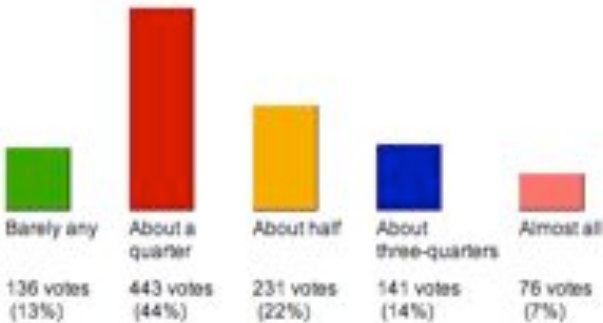
A busy day so far – on the ball all the time, answering emails, calls and speaking to the project manager. Yes, so far a busy day but in reality how productive are you? Yes, how productive? How much focused concentrated work did you do in the above example? How much did you really achieve?

But first let's take a look at what people *feel* – now I highlight *feel* because this is not based on a careful analysis (which is incidentally extremely difficult to do – I've tried), it is just based on how people feel. I will show you in a few moments the difference between feeling and reality.

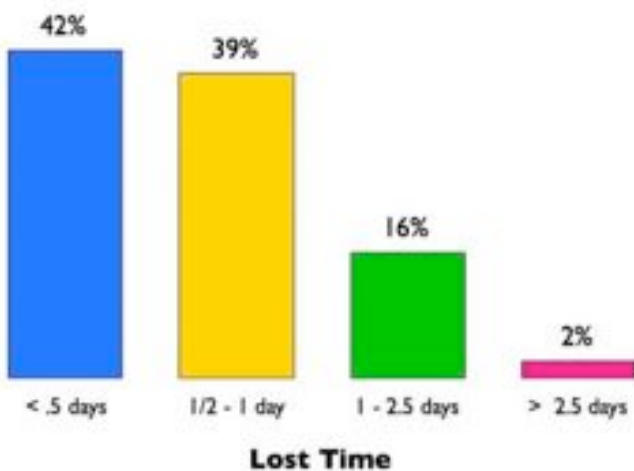
The Statistics

“Way back in 2004 the average corporate email user received 126 messages a day, a 55% increase from 2003. Translating that number into your most valuable commodity - time - workers are now spending 26% of their day managing email, a number expected to hit 41% by 2009 (all figures from the Radicati Group). In addition the Wall Street Journal did a reader's poll in which 79% of responders said that *less than half their emails are valuable*.

What proportion of the emails you receive at work are actually important to you?



In addition the 2005 McKinsey Global Survey of Business Executives revealed that a staggering amount of time is wasted on emails, voice mails, and meetings with no value:



This means that 57% of executives feel they waste more than half a day each week. And let's assume for the sake of argument (and many may feel like arguing this point) that executives are focused people with clear ideas of where to go and how to get there. Just assuming, right! Even the majority of executives are losing more than 10% of their time on ...complete and utter waste.

Now for some more figures on productivity:

The Microsoft Office Personal Productivity Challenge (PPC), which drew responses from more than 38,000 people in 200 countries, rated workers' individual productivity based on their responses to 18 statements about work-related practices. Worldwide, survey participants revealed some interesting conclusions about the nature of productivity in their workplace, including these (

People work an average of 45 hours a week; they consider about *17 of those hours to be unproductive.*

So again based on feeling, workers feel they are losing up to 2 days a week – 2 days: that’s 40% of work time. That is a staggering figure – simply put, each company could survive effectively with 40%, yes 40%, less people. Shocking and I mean this, really shocking!

So now we’re talking about productivity and we’re talking about how people *feel* about being productive and how much time they *feel* they’re wasting.

Now in the example I gave previously of this very busy morning: reading emails, writing important answers, going into a meeting, discussing with the project leader. Does this person (you?) *feel* unproductive? The answer is probably: no! You are doing your work, running from one place to another and dealing with important issues so:

1. You are busy
2. You *feel* productive

But I bet, and I would bet a lot, you aren’t. Let’s start to analyse what is happening.

Let’s do a really simple analysis:

100 emails a day (nice round number and many corporate users tend to get around this amount – though figures vary wildly).

I spend one minute on average on each email:

Some you spend longer

Some you spend less

Some you open start to write then waste

Some you start to write, leave open and finish, or not, later

Some you waste

Some you file
Some you flag
Some just sit in you inbox for days, weeks, months, and years (?)

So let's say on average 1 minute for each email

That makes 100 emails = 100 minutes
Now let's say there is a change-over time between emails, either on deciding what to do, opening and then closing, searching for the most important emails, printing out, sighing, thinking...and so on.

Let's set the change-over time between emails as one minute also:

100 emails = 100 minutes

That means 100 emails reading, etc. = 100 minutes
Change-over time 100 emails = 100 minutes

That's total of 200 minutes a day on email that means a grand total of *3 hrs and 20 minutes*. Now that is a fair portion of your day.

Now, let's play a bit with figures. And first I will give you some more research on how quickly, or better said, how long people take to get back to task:

The New York Times reported that
*"In a recent study, a group of Microsoft workers took, on average, **15 minutes to return to serious mental tasks**, like writing reports or computer code, after responding to incoming e-mail or instant messages. They strayed off to reply to other messages or browse news, sports or entertainment Web sites.*

I was surprised by how easily people were distracted and how long it took them to get back to the task,” said Eric Horvitz, a Microsoft research scientist and co-author, with Shamsi Iqbal of the University of Illinois. If it’s this bad at Microsoft,” Mr. Horvitz added, “ it has to be bad at other companies, too.”

So let’s get this straight - up to 15 minutes to change over – wow! Ok, this won’t always be the case particularly if there are other time pressures but then again I presume these Microsoft workers were also busy people (and probably still are). Note that this certainly isn’t a Microsoft problem this is a generic problem. I will come back to this problem later in the book - at the moment it is enough to say that when we switch tasks in daily life we take a lot longer than we assume ...and may not even *feel* unproductive.

So let’s do some more simple mathematics. Back to our 100 emails:

100 emails – now let’s say we’re taking on average 90 seconds on each email (not long actually)
100 emails - and let’s say that the change-over time is now 2 minutes (not anywhere near close to 15 minutes).

We now get:

$$100 \times 1.5 = 150$$

$$100 \times 2 = 200$$

$$150 + 200 = 350 \text{ minutes} = 5 \text{ hrs } 50 \text{ minutes!}$$

If we assume that a working day is 8 hrs then that is 73% of our working day...or rather we now have 2 hrs 10 minutes left to have meetings, make calls, write reports, make proposals, formulate spreadsheets, and so on and so forth. So our “real work” is only done in 2 hrs 10 minute of the day, potentially. This, of course, doesn’t even take into

account any other issues such as general administration, on the job training, meetings, new directives, computer and software problems (not at Microsoft I presume!) and other noise that is always coming in. Well, no wonder that many of us feel a little under pressure. And to really put this into perspective let's look at my final figures – then we can start getting into the nitty gritty and actually finding solutions to deal with the flood of email. To find our Noah's Ark – or better: our Electronic Ark.

A simple analysis of time spent on task (i.e. doing what you are actually paid to do – or want to do).

Let's assume that in every job and function, whether working for yourself or not, there are a certain amount of non-core tasks to do. These will include some general admin, performance reviews, new directives, on-the-job training, information meetings, down time to do with technical problems, new software training, re-organisation discussions, etc., etc. Let's say this is 20% of your time on average. Now you are spending 80% of your time on your core-task. Now within this core task there are also many little sub-tasks – which are maybe not directly doing your core-work, checking on information, reading latest research, admin forms, process issues, form filling, etc., etc. So let's say that within your core task you spend 80% of your time focused and on task:

That gives us $80\% \text{ of } 80\% = 64\%$

Now I repeat this: **64%**. So if you are really efficient and control the noise and external factors and keep really focused, you will spend 64% of your time on task (this includes no change-over time) as soon as you spend 15 seconds change-over time your efficiency has dropped to **below** 64%. If you are really, really focused you can work

at 64% efficiency. What does this mean? This means that most people in business are actually working at 30-50% efficiency...and as we saw above still feeling busy and productive. It is no wonder that many of us have to work long hours and get less free time than we want and start talking about a work-life balance.

We also saw that email, in many office jobs, particularly, can take an awful amount of time away from us while bearing in mind that only a proportion of these are actually useful for us.

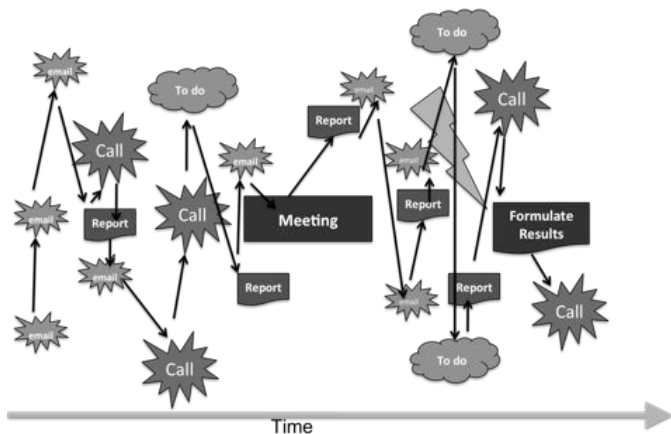
My first rule, and the biggest rule in time management in service jobs, is simple. Control your email and you will control your time. You can free up to 2 hrs a day through simple techniques. You can also avoid the many, many pitfalls of email communication...to learn how, read on....

Is your inbox your best friend? Or is your inbox a block to efficiency?

Reactive & Proactive

Now many of us may like to think of ourselves as on the ball, active and proactive. We do things and get things done. And many of us feel productive and feel very busy. Now in the introduction we looked at why that feeling is often very different to reality. Now this diagram shows us in a simple diagrammatic representation of how our day may look. The bolt of lightning is incidentally an “emergency event”.

A busy day...a reactive day



So a busy a day, which may feel unproductive or may even feel productive - we are certainly doing our jobs, so to speak. Now you notice how we are jumping from one task to another, bearing also in mind what we said in the introduction about change-over time. Bearing also in mind

that to get back to full concentration is going to take longer than the simple change-over time. I am at this moment sitting here writing this book and one thing for sure is that it would be almost impossible for me to write this book in 5-minute blocks, impossible. If I had tried to do that, I wouldn't have written it and you wouldn't be reading it. It takes a certain amount of time for me to get into the rhythm, to balance my ideas, to formulate them and to start writing and keep a certain amount of momentum going. This is the same with any slightly complex task. It could be bookkeeping, it could be writing a report, or a proposal or writing a sales document to a key client. One of the biggest challenges we have in reality is controlling our mind, controlling our reactive mind.

The problem is, you see, our minds are fundamentally designed to be reactive. Yes, we have planning ability and ability to be proactive but we seem to have a core conditioning for reactivity.

Visual stimuli are also particularly powerful. If we see something, we start to think of it. This in turn can affect our whole thinking patterns and even have a physical effect on us. Another dreary day in the office and you see a picture of a sunny beach, you can almost feel the warmth of the sun on your skin, the sound of the waves gently swishing onto the beach in the background, you can see white sands stretching as far as the eye can see. Your mind drifts... as you just were as I started to send you off. It's so easy to do.

So problem number one with email and time management in general is this:



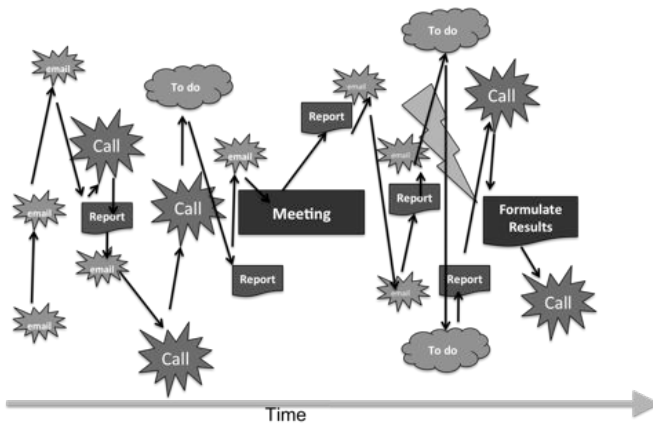
Your mind

Yes, your mind will trip you up at every possible chance. It will see something and “ping”, your mind has jumped off task – then something else “important” comes in and “ping”, you are off on another track, then another email is in and you’re off on another track and then you notice you have that report to finish and by god you just don’t have the time! Or do you? Well, of course you do. It’s just that by succumbing to the reactive mind you are jumping from one task to another to another and losing an incredible amount of efficiency. You are becoming extremely inefficient. Remember in playing with numbers previously that potentially I only have 2 hours or so a day to actually do any “real” work. If that is now split into uneven blocks and different times at different lengths slap bang in the middle of hundreds of emails flying around, phone calls, meetings and other business stuff, you can easily imagine that it is difficult to do anything really productive with that time. And it is difficult; it would, without question, be difficult for *anyone* to work in an extremely focused way in that sort of environment. Note here also that unfortunately that way of working seems to be ingrained in some corporate cultures as *the* way to work. It is perceived as a way of showing you are sharp and dynamic and full of energy. In reality you are showing how inefficient you are!

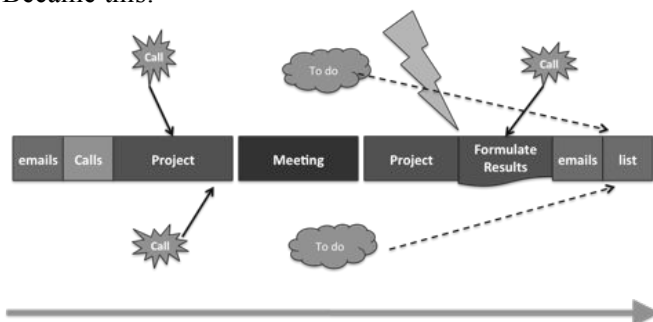
So being reactive is fundamentally bad – now we have to be careful here not to confuse reacting to people and being

on the ball and ready to do what you need to. Yes, we do need to respond to emails quickly, yes we do need to react to requests and proposals and yes, we do need to go to meetings - the question is how do we organise it and how do we become more proactive – this will be dealt with later on...and I can assure you it is no rocket science: in fact it is extremely simple and easy and anyone can do it.

Imagine if the day presented diagrammatically as this:



Became this:



Now this looks a whole lot better. Yes, some calls are coming in - you can't control them – and I have even included the “emergency event”. But by just looking at the diagrams you probably already feel less stressed. Without even doing any mathematics you will be able to say that diagram 2 is much more efficient, you get much more work done, you are less stressed...and importantly you have more control and are more successful!

That's a pretty good deal then.

Email: The Good the Bad and the Ugly

Now let's not forget that email is a fantastic tool – and many of the time management issues are actually not directly linked to email... rather to the mind. It's just that in today's working environment email takes up an awful amount of time and is directly and indirectly responsible for an immense, and I mean immense, amount of time wasted. Time again for some amateur mathematics:

Let's take Microsoft. With it's around 60,000 employees if we assume that each employee wastes, or better said, doesn't use optimally their time, and loses 2 hours a day (easily done as we saw in the introduction) then that's 120,000 hours a day. For each year at 240 working days a year (20 days a month) that makes 28,800,000 hours lost. Wow, now I could sure do something with almost 29 million hours. As I said previously, this will be the same at any service company. As a nice round figure we could say that each service company (and I would realistically assume that it is much higher in many) loses 5 million man-hours a year for each 10,000!

Put that into money and we get a different figure.

Let's assume that each man-hour cost the company \$100 then that is \$2.88 billion dollars lost a year.

Most service companies however have average costs per employee closer to \$200 (all in: workstations, software support, office space, office furniture, insurance, salary, social contributions, training, etc., etc.). That then makes a whopping total of \$5.76b lost per year on...nothingness.

For smaller companies think of 500 hours a year lost per employee...! So for a small company we can think of \$50,000 to \$100,000 lost per year per employee.

Now for many small companies that would make a big difference.

So inefficiency, particularly generated by email, can cost a lot, and really a lot, of money. But what is it about email that does this? I thought email was meant to improve our productivity, to increase our efficiency, to make communication a whole lot simpler. But it doesn't. So let's put it into a nice table and see what we can learn from the pros and cons. From there we can then start to push email into the tool it should be: an extremely quick and efficient tool for doing business.

Email: The Good, The Bad, The Reality

Pros	Cons	Reality
Quick	Too Quick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Badly formulated emails ➔ Emails sent without thinking ➔ Quick answer given without giving all information ➔ Email sent to wrong person
CC	Too many people copied Too many people see sensitive issues Too many mails received with unimportant information Discussion forums Spiralling conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Huge CC lists ➔ Masses of CC received ➔ CC important person to increase power (power games) ➔ Petty discussions ➔ Clicking reply to all ➔ Spiralling conflicts ➔ Open unstructured discussion forums
Written	Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Written format has no tone ➔ Can be misunderstood ➔ Can be held against you ➔ In combination with “Quick” leads to unprofessional and badly formulated emails ➔ Misunderstandings can’t be immediately detected and corrected
Always online	Inefficient working times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Becoming slave to email ➔ Unstructured and unfocused working day
Information	Lost in flood of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Emails get lost in inboxes ➔ Many emails are left unanswered ➔ Too many attachments to realistically deal with ➔ Too much unimportant information ➔ Too easy to give information

So email does have many advantages, that is clear...and unfortunately also a pile of disadvantages. Particularly if used incorrectly, email can cause conflict, overflow with information, inefficient working days, much too many emails...and so an and so forth. So let's develop a strategy to deal with this.

This in any organisation is worrying – in large organisations you can imagine how many millions, if not billions are lost because of bad use of email.

Strategies to Turn Email into an Efficient and Effective Tool

So if we look back to our list of disadvantages, and I know this is far from exhaustive, we can see some patterns in a 3 main different areas:

1. Email Writing

- clarity of information
- getting answers
- avoiding misunderstandings / conflict

2. Email Management

- in-box management
- time management
- understood processes (i.e. corporate guidelines)
- continual processing

3. Efficiency

- Focus on job
- Distractions
- Inefficient use of time

The rest of this book will now deal with these areas and how to make email incredibly effective and efficient. Now I know we all know how to write but the writing section is extremely important: we will look at some stupidly simple concepts but also at concepts such as neuromessaging (my personal term, well, I think so anyway). This is basically making sure your messages actually stimulates the brain i.e. creates some sort of reaction.

The second part looks at email management and particularly the time management tricks and tips that will lead you or your company to become extremely efficient

and effective. Now some of you may say why should I do this? It's the company's responsibility – and to some extent yes. Well, in reality it is amazing how little most companies do to really control the biggest time waster of the modern era. But more importantly for me is that you can decrease your stress and your efficiency and start going where you want to go in life! Simple: less stress, a better feeling at the end of every day, more success. Please read on....

Starting out:

*Using the Pros and blocking the cons
... making email the tool of efficiency
and effectiveness it is designed to be:*

Part 1: Communication

Part 2: Email Management

Part 3: Efficiency

Part 1

Communication

*The art of writing effective emails
and neuromessaging*

1.1 Writing?

1.2 Neuromessaging

1.3 2 Golden Rules

1.4 WWW

1.5 KISS

1.6 Creating Frames

1.7 Humanising

1.8 Stimulating the Brain

1.9 Conflicts by Email

1.1 Writing?

If I tell people I could teach them to write, I often get one of 2 reactions:

1. A blank or bemused look which says
err...helloooo, I am 38, have got 2 university degrees and I can write!
2. An offended and haughty look followed by a short tirade of comments on how well the person can write.

Yes, you are right. I know you can write – but can you write effectively? Writing well in a business, or particularly, in an email context is very different to writing compositions or essays that are designed to give you high marks in school or at university. It is also very different to writing a novel. Writing well in a business context is about cutting away the fat and just providing the nice juicy meat. It's not about showing off how many big words you can use, it's not about using suitable shades of inference...it's about getting your message across in the quickest, easiest, clearest way so that as many people as possible can understand your email and understand it quickly and give the response that you need quickly. On one hand this is easy but in reality it is harder than most could imagine. Mark Twain once said, "I apologise for the long letter, I didn't have time for a short one". This may at first sight sound irrational or just humorous – it is not. To write short and focused letters (then – emails now) is very difficult and requires focusing your thoughts - it is much, much harder work to write a good short email than to write a fuzzy long one. This is why we got lots of fuzzy long ones (or unclear short ones).

Yes, you will have to think – that’s the bad news. The good news is that your emails will get read, will be understood, you’ll get more responses, you’ll get quicker responses, you’ll get responses that are better structured. A client once said to me “What I’ve noticed is that if I write clear structured emails I get the same sort of emails back”. This means you will save time and avoid misunderstandings and do your job better and with less stress.

Yes, also we may also need to include some pleasantries and keep the tone professional – it’s also not about being brutally direct, we may have to be diplomatic, and we may have to be polite and respectful. At the same time we do need to make the message clear and direct. Read on...

1.2 NeuroMessaging

A term coined by me. Well, I think so at least. As far as I know I am the only person using the term - but again the world is a big place and neuroscience is very en vogue at the moment. We can also talk about humanising, or we can talk about psychology. What we're basically talking about is targeting the message at the human brain – yes, our best friend and worst enemy at the same time. What we do know is that the brain functions in certain ways and responds, or not, to certain signals and input. Originally this came under the title of psychology. In the 90s we spoke a lot about humanising, and now that we can actually look into the brain with magnetic resonance imaging and see which parts of the brain are lighting up we have started to talk about neuroscience. For a lot of what I will be talking about you don't need any sort of scientific background - it is simply common sense.

What neuromessaging means is that we are formulating the message you give in such a way that the brain will respond or react to that message. You are giving a message that is better targeted at the human brain – which is probably a pretty good thing because we do tend to deal with humans a lot of the time at work. This is where those people who try to show off with how good their writing is could fall flat on their faces because using a big eloquent word may do nothing for the mind (apart from show how clever you are...ok, which may be the desired effect).

If I have targeted the mind I have targeted the person and I will get a response – that's it.

Now most of neuromessaging is just common sense and most of it we know instinctively already, some is repackaging; yet it is also more concrete and neuroscience also gives us some fascinating insights that we never expected. Neuroscience allows us to peer into the mind and say “Aha! I told you so.” Many of these rules have been around for a long time. Nevertheless seeing the way the mind reacts shows so clearly and plainly and irrevocably what is working in the mind. It shows us how good the simple rules are and how bad some other writing is.

