

Effective communication in the digital age

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Diagnose messages with
the 21CWorkLens to
reclaim your inbox and time



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Why now is the time to act



Towards the start of the digital age the Nobel laureate Robert Solow quipped, “*You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics*” [1].

Email is a computer age technology we see everywhere, but it is unclear that it has made us more productive. Paradoxically, we may be less productive¹.

What changed with email?

Email brought a technological solution to two limitations of paper messages:

- The time required for the message to travel from sender to recipient was effectively eliminated.
- A message can be sent to everyone

Using email and instant messaging services² is easy, and provided to employees without usage limits.

Changes in technology led to changes in behaviour. Email replaced paper messages and became the default tool for coordinating work and establishing new processes. As a result, the number of messages sent through organisations has increased.

Where are we now?

Microsoft reported that employees in 2025 are interrupted every two minutes during core work hours [3]. For many, messages no longer help people accomplish their work, sending, receiving and processing messages has become their work.

Work of this nature can feel like a never-ending battle, a battle people feel like they are losing. **80% of global workers report they lack enough time and energy to do their work** [3], and emails that need action are left unread³.

What does the future hold?

AI agents can quickly synthesise messages and emails, but they also increase the rate at which emails can be written and sent. As a result, **AI may make things worse**. One study found that AI super-charged time spent on email, but reduced time spent on the focused, uninterrupted work likely to create value [5].

How can this paper help?

The first step to finding a solution is understanding the problem. This paper applies the 21CWorkLens to **diagnose the content of emails that consumes the time of your teams**.

It then provides guidance to eliminate emails that contain and cause waste, and with it **increase the productivity and well-being of the team**.

¹ See the white paper, Productivity for the digital age [2] for an explanation of the modern productivity paradox.

² The term email is used in this paper to include instant messaging services. They have the same fundamental core of asynchronous typed messages, but with instant messages used in a less formal manner.

³ Popular authors claim that 1/3 of emails that require attention are unread [4].



What is included in this paper?

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What change do we want?

Context with an overview of the problem we face, with a description of the goal of the paper, and the main steps to achieve the goal

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What change do we want?

Where are we now?



Email and messaging services have unintentionally created a new type of workflow, named **The Hyperactive Hive Mind** by productivity guru, Cal Newport.

It is a workflow centered around ongoing conversation fueled by unstructured and unscheduled messages delivered through digital communication tools [6].

It arose from the increase in emails, and the lack of fundamental difference between important emails requiring immediate action, and emails that with tangential context requiring no action. Without a clear signal, workers self-interrupt to check inboxes 'just in case' an urgent and important message has arrived. They check inboxes on average 70-80 times a day [7].

Switching context to check emails and return to the task at hand takes time from the value-creating activities that the customer wants to pay for.

Better rules, subject headings, and AI agents ease the symptoms and do not address the cause. They also do not remove indirect costs of server spaces and AI agents.

What is the goal?



Cal's book, **A World Without Email** [6], analyses the hyperactive hive mind then lays down the challenge to create a better workplace by removing email and messaging services.

Some business leaders have taken the extreme step to eliminate all internal email [8], but it will not be the right answer for many organisations. Many messages are essential, and email is the best platform for many. This paper aims for a more targeted and surgical approach.

The goal is to improve productivity and well-being of managerial and knowledge workers by helping them to gain control of the emails and messages that consume their time.

How do we accomplish the goal?



The steps to claim control of our inboxes are:

1. Analyse and categorise email content
2. Select a category of email that consumes employee time
3. Work to eliminate, move or manage the communication

1 Analysing emails

Identifying mail theme using the 21CWorkLens



What is the 21CWorkLens?

The 21CWorkLens has evolved from lean manufacturing techniques⁴ that help people understand whether activities are in service of value. Specifically, the 21CWorkLens expands the techniques so they can be applied to managerial and knowledge work carried out whilst sat at a computer.

The 21CWorkLens consists of 4 high-level categories:

- A. Creating Value by Delivering for Today's Customer
- B. Creating Value by Investing for Tomorrow's Customer
- C. Waste
- D. Management

It is described in full in a complementary white paper 'Productivity for the digital age' [2]. Reading the complementary paper first can be helpful, but it not essential.



How do you determine the theme of an email?

Messages on instant messaging platforms are typically short with little context. Whilst there is an infinite number of things that can be written in a message, there are a limited message types, for example either asking a question or sharing information.

Emails are usually longer than instant messages and may include different types of statement. For example, a single email is more likely to both share information and ask a question.

We identified 8 common themes for emails⁵. These themes can be linked to the high-level categories of the 21CWorkLens, which in turn can help diagnose whether emails are valuable, wasteful or part of the function of management (see table 1 for summary, and appendix 1 for detail with examples and discussion).

Knowing whether emails are valuable or not is the first step to gaining control on where workers spend their time.

⁴ Lean is a broad term used to encompass philosophies and approaches that helped manufacturing companies become more efficient.

⁵ The 8 themes are written in simple words to help people select the correct category. They are not intended to be a robust mutually-exclusive and collectively-exhaustive taxonomy for email classification. More robust classifications are available in the literature, but they tend towards more technical language [9]

Table 1 – Relationship of email theme to 21CWorkLens category

	Email Theme	Value	Waste	Managing
1	Call to Action			✓
2	Administration			✓
3	Networking			✓
4	Building trust and connection			✓
5	Information known – not shared or readily available		✓	
6	Defective		✓	
7	Repetition / Duplication		✓	
8	Information shared	✓	✓	✓



Typical results

Participants of Executive Education and MBA programs at the Luxembourg School of Business are typically employed in local companies. Those who attended productivity and operations courses were asked to classify their next 100 emails⁶ with the 21CWorkLens⁷.

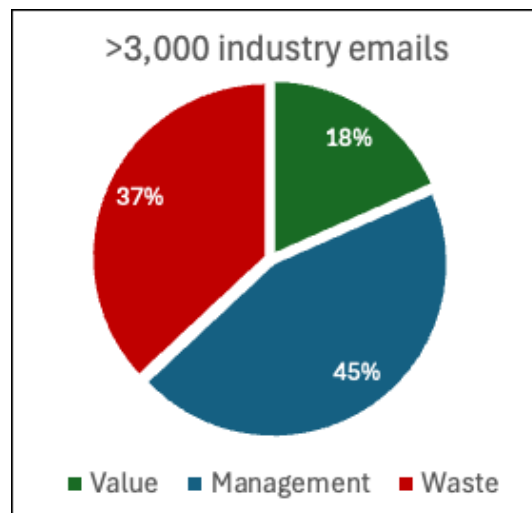


Figure 1 – Aggregated self-classification of work emails by 21CWorkLens category

When submissions were aggregated, management emails formed the largest category. The result is neither inherently positive nor negative. Good management amplifies value, whereas poor management amplifies waste. It is impossible to know from the results whether the management emails ultimately resulted in value, or more management and waste.

⁶ The scope was limited to:

- 100 emails – A sample deemed large enough to be representative without creating a large reporting burden. Some students opted to complete all emails for a full week to capture a full cycle from their business rhythm.
- Email only – Expectations for the speed of reply are lower in email than in messaging services. It provides an opportunity for the recipient to take a short moment and record the category.
- Main inbox only – Sub-folders with messages routed by automated rules by subjects, senders, or distribution lists were excluded because they are less likely to cause distraction from valuable work.

⁷ A template was provided, the latest version of which is included in appendix 2.



When aggregated, waste emails formed the second largest category. However, for many individuals, waste was largest.

Valuable emails consistently formed the smallest category.



Data quality and accuracy

A potential source of error arises from contributors misunderstanding the 21CWorkLens and misclassifying emails. Risk of errors was mitigated by combining template design with a request for the contributor.

The template is colour-coded according to the relationship of email theme to category. Entry cells that align with the relationships in table 1 are coloured white. Cells where entries would not fit with the relationships, are coloured grey, e.g. categorising a ‘Call to Action’ email as **value**.

- If contributors made an entry into a grey cell, they were asked to comment on their logic for selecting that cell.
- If contributors only entered values into the white cells, they were asked to comment on the 3 emails they found hardest to categorise.

Contributor comments provided assurance the framework had been understood and implemented correctly, without sharing details from emails. Datasets were excluded if comments indicated a clear mis-understanding.

Comments revealed that contributors were more likely mis-classify management emails as value, and wasteful emails as management.

The most common misclassification ‘Call to Action’ to value, instead of management. For example, an email containing the request *“I’ve updated the document, it is your turn to review and update it”*.

- The email **organises** authors into a logical sequence to write the document for a customer. Organising is a management function.
- Value is created for the customer when the authors write their contributions into the document.





Analysing Organisational Culture and Efficiency

Technology and organizational culture can combine to change behaviour within an organisation. We believe signals of behaviours can be detected in email and messaging services. These signals may provide cultural insights.



Culture of decision-making

Emails in the theme of **sharing information** help decision-makers to **control** activities and make sure objectives are met. It is a **management** activity that can lead to value when the results of the decision are implemented later.

The cultural dimension of **decision making** can be framed as tending towards either a consensual versus a top-down and autocratic approach [10]. Organisations that tend towards...:

- ... **consensual** decision-making are more likely to include **more** people in the 'To' and 'Cc' fields of emails.
- ... **autocratic** decision-making are more likely to include **fewer** people in the 'To' and 'Cc' fields of emails.

Whilst a tendency towards an extreme of the dimension is not inherently good or bad, there is scope for greater distraction to workers if the email volume grows from a consensual culture.



Psychological Safety

Emails are recorded and usually retained. This can be a benefit, but can also lead to a negative work pattern.

In organisations tending towards a **blame culture**, people are incentivised to include managers and stakeholders on emails. When they ensure others are aware they have discharged their responsibilities, they protect their reputation if there is another problem in the process.

These emails are likely to be the theme of **sharing information**, with a category of **waste**. Managers and stakeholders don't act on the content or read in detail, they skim, file or delete based on experience of the subject, sender, or awareness of the original email that started the thread.

It follows that an increase in the number of people included in emails could be a result of growing mistrust and an erosion of **psychological safety**.





Communication Efficiency

The fast and asynchronous benefits of email bring 2 negative corollaries that increase the chance of misunderstandings.

1. Asynchronous messages do not provide an opportunity to clarify ambiguity in the moment.
2. Written words are devoid of non-verbal cues of tone and body-language.

Misunderstandings and clarifications are likely to lead to more questions, responses and exchanges, and longer email threads.

The theme of emails within a long thread may change over time. Some individual messages in the thread may be the theme of **sharing information** used for a **management** function, others may include truly **valuable** information. However, every email risks incurring **wastes** from distracting and **switching people's context**, and they are usually created with the **motion** of typing (motion is a waste).

In organisations with **efficient communication cultures**, people will move communications to voice or in-person to quickly resolve issues. In organisations where communication efficiency is not valued, email threads can grow very long.



Initial investigation

We developed software to analyse emails and calculate 2 key indicators that could be used to investigate culture:

- Average number of recipients
- Average thread length

To test the concept, we selected 3 clients for whom we delivered similar size events.

Table 2 – KPIs of email correspondence with clients

Client	A	B	C
Ave. recipient number	5.3	4.8	4.8
Ave. thread length	4.2	10.9	5.1

Whilst the test is extremely limited in nature, the results align with expectations. From our limited perspective:

- Client A leans towards more consensus decision-making, correlating with a greater average number of recipients included on emails.
- Client B had a strong preference for communication through email. They were more likely to respond to suggestion of a call or face-to-face conversation with an additional email, resulting in a higher average thread length.

Whilst these results are limited in scope and scale, the approach shows promise and is an area of further research.



2 Work to eliminate, move or manage

After analysing and understanding the source of email categories, there are three options:

- A. Eliminate
- B. Move communication or process to a more fit-for-purpose platform
- C. Manage to reduce unnecessary distraction

Changes may incur financial cost, or a create an initial moment of user friction, but reducing the ongoing hidden costs of email will pay back over the long-term.

Approaches are shared below for other to replicate or gain inspiration when searching for solutions to challenges they identify.

Cultural approaches



Decision-making culture, communication efficiency, and levels of psychological safety can influence the quantity of emails.

Changing the organisational culture, that will in turn **eliminate** emails, takes leadership. Leaders who want to minimise the burden of email on their organisation should role-model effective and frugal email use, and respectfully challenge those who don't.

Managers and team members can reduce the burden of email within their own sphere of control. One mechanism is through team working agreements that often include communication expectations and norms (see appendix 3 for example⁸).

Structural approaches

Many quick wins are structural and within control of the user.



Agree a more fit-for purpose process

Emails to schedule internal meetings can be **eliminated** by providing access to busy/free information in calendars and agreed behavioural norms.

Similarly, calendly and other scheduling tools can be used to **eliminate** back-and-forth emails with people external companies.

⁸ An approach to minimise distractions that includes a more in-depth discussion of team working agreements is included in a complementary white paper 'Redefining the working day for performance' [11]



Unsubscribing

Some companies enter your inbox by asking for your email address to access their website or download their report. They take your attention by regularly sending promotional materials and digests. They maintain their profile by creating friction to **unsubscribe** by positioning the link away from where casual readers glance.

- The recommended default is to unsubscribe and **eliminate** these promotional emails and digests at source.
- Automatically routing emails you believe may occasionally contain **valuable** information to a dedicated inbox subfolder can provide 2 benefits:
 - Emails in a subfolder are less likely to distract.
 - It creates an interim state that can postpone the decision for later when there is more data. If, you have not read or gained any valuable insights after a month of routing the email to a dedicated folder, you can confidently unsubscribe and **eliminate** future emails.



Notifications

Turning off notifications from other platforms and **eliminate** emails where:

- You log into the other platform every day as part of completing your work without being prompted by a notification.
- You need to access the other platform on a regular, but none-urgent, basis. For example, financially approving transactions: Instead of being distracted every time a new transaction arrives in the financial system inbox, block time in the calendar to access the other platform and complete the approvals at the frequency that suits the workflow.

Situations where the notifications are useful include:

- When notification emails contain hyperlinks that automatically open the alternate platform. These links can reduce the wastes of motion and waiting that occur when opening the browser, navigating to the login page and entering credentials.
- When the other system needs to be accessed on an irregular basis.

In both cases, routing notifications to an inbox subfolder can preserve their utility and reduce distraction.



Select an alternative communication channel

If you can, utilize the messaging systems within the platforms that are integrated with the work. Posting messages on work cards in Jira/Asana/Trello takes the message into the context in which it belongs and can be reviewed whilst working on a specific project or task.

Background: Problems with email

Customers pay for products or services, not internal emails.



Internal emails arise because companies are complex organisations where different people have different roles and authorities.

A customer may contact the sales department asking to buy a product. The sales department may send an internal email to the shipping department asking for the item to be sent. The internal email is needed for the customer to get the product, but the customer is not paying for the email to be sent.

From the customer's perspective, it would be better if the salesperson they spoke to authorised and managed the shipping.

- The customer doesn't care about how the company is organised.
- The customer doesn't directly want to pay the bureaucracy of managing the organisation
- **The customer just wants the product or service.**

Taking a customer-centric view challenges the existence of emails in an organisation, which leads to a natural follow-on question...:

...If customers never want to pay for internal emails, why have they become so ubiquitous?



Email saves time (... initially)

Before the digital revolution, if you had a question or needed help from someone before you would likely go and talk to them or call them by phone. Both were easier and faster than sending a question through the internal mail system.

After email, sending a message became the easiest option.

Even if someone is only a few desks away, sending a message can be quicker. You no longer spend time:

- ... walking to them.
- ... waiting for them to stop what they were doing.
- ... carrying out the social ceremonies of greeting, sharing pleasantries, and saying goodbye.



Emails are recorded

All email messages are time-stamped and stored, and so can serve as a **system of record**. Once an action has been completed and an email sent informing, a semi-permanent record is created.



Asynchronous conversations are productive (... for you, ... initially)

In-person conversations require you to wait for the other person to stop what they were doing or pick up the phone. With asynchronous email, you no longer need to wait and can use the saved time to write a message to someone else - you are now more productive.

However, the people you wrote to both have 2 messages waiting for them.

As this behaviour is replicated through the organisation, the backlog of messages and extra communication creates bottlenecks and noise that reduces whole system productivity. The people receiving message are unlikely to feel more productive. The waiting messages are more likely to make them feel overwhelmed or anxious.

A productivity paradox is created – improvements in productivity for parts of the system, lead to a degradation of the overall system productivity⁹.



Email is versatile

In the past, starting a new process would require a coordination system. For example, people could set up a notice board to share when they have completed their action and inform others that the next step in the process could be carried out. Costs would be incurred setting up the board, and in time spent telling people how to use it.

A simpler option available now is email. When an action is completed, an email can be sent to the next person who needs to act, copying in the whole team so they are aware of the status. This option does not incur any additional cost to the user. Everyone knows how to use email. Software licenses costs for email are fixed and sunk.

Email's versatility led to it becoming a **default platform for a new process** and we use it to manage a lot more than was managed with paper messages.



Direct user costs do not scale with consumption

Sending more email does not incur marginal cost. Without incentives in place for employees to limit the number of messages sent, they send...:

- ... emails about more topics.
- ... more messages on the same topic. For example, people wouldn't take the time to write someone's address onto an internal envelope to respond with a single word of 'thanks', but they will send it in an email.

⁹ See complementary white paper 'Productivity for the digital age' for a detailed description of the productivity paradox [2].

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Relationship of email theme to 21CWorkLens category, with examples and commentary

	Email Theme	Examples	Comments	Category		
1	Call to Action	• <i>I need you to do this thing</i> • <i>Your turn to update the document.</i> • <i>Please set up a meeting with the marketing team.</i>	An email asking someone to do something is the organising function within management. In academic words, the purpose of the message is to mobilise resources (people) to perform activities			✓
2	Administration	• Meeting requests • Meeting responses	Administrative emails help organise and manage events and activities. People may verbally agree to meet then follow up with an electronic invite. Good invites increase the chance of people attending by blocking the time, providing location or dial-in details. Agendas and context help people prepare. Accept / Decline / Tentative responses help the organizer plan by informing them who will be present.			✓
3	Networking	• <i>Nice to e-meet you, I think we have mutual interests, would you like to meet up?</i> • <i>It was great to meet you at lunch, let me know if you find out more about Project Nexus.</i>	We have become accustomed to meeting people and building our network online. Networking emails can contain many management functions. For example, influencing the receiver to be interested in the subject, then organising a follow up meeting to explore areas of mutual interest.			✓
4	Building trust & connection	• <i>I know you are waiting on me for this, but there is a delay and I will get it to you soon.</i> • <i>Thank you for doing that, it is important to me.</i>	Some emails help to manage relationships through influence. They may show empathy for the recipient, instead of share information. If done well, they increase trust levels that will be leveraged in more challenging times. If done poorly, they become a distraction.			✓

	Email Theme	Examples	Comments	Category		
5	Information known – not shared or readily available	• <i>When are you free to meet?</i> • <i>Sorry, I have another commitment on Tuesday, how about Thursday?</i> • <i>How many orders do we need to ship next week?</i>	Some messages are created because systems aren't integrated and/or information isn't available to the person who wants it. They may not have access to a platform where information is stored (e.g. colleague's calendar, database, etc) or know how to navigate within the platform. Instead, they ask someone to provide the information to them. Whilst there is an element of organising and managing the other person, getting someone else to fetch information is a waste. It is the digital equivalent of asking a porter to bring materials from the warehouse to the assembly line - motion and travel.		✓	
6	Defective	• <i>This time with the attachment...</i> • <i>Sorry, I sent to the wrong John Smith.</i> • <i>I am writing because this thing should have happened, but it didn't</i>	In addition to the examples, any email that leads to a mis-understanding is wasteful. Mis-understood emails do not lead to the intended outcome.		✓	
7	Repetition / Duplication	• <i>Following up on my email below, can you provide the information requested?</i> • <i>You have a message waiting in Teams.</i>	Anything done more than once is wasteful.		✓	
8	Information shared	Waste: • <i>Copying you in for visibility</i> Value: • <i>Here are the prompts I used to develop personas aligned to our customers, they may help you.</i> Managing: • <i>Their project lead is vegetarian, make sure there is an option for them at lunch.</i>	Emails that only share information can be any of the categories depending on the information shared. Emails you delete or file before returning to your work because the information is not interesting or useful are waste. Interesting and/or useful emails could be valuable or management. If they grow your knowledge or skills they are valuable. If they make you act differently in the future they could be management.	✓	✓	✓



Appendix 2 – Template for contributors to classify emails using the 21CWorkLens

Instructions:		Category									
For each work email that arrives in your main inbox: 1) Find the theme that it most closely resembles 2) Find the category you believe the email relates to 3) Find the cell that matches the theme and category and Increase the number by 1 If the cell is grey, write a short summary that describes the concept of the email without sharing details and why you selected the theme and category. If you cannot find a theme that aligns with your email, use the SPARE row and enter a comment that shares the concept of the email without including details.		Delivering for today's customer		Investing for tomorrow's customer		Waste	Manage				
		Satisfying	Improving	Growing skills	Growing ideas	TIMWOODS	Planning	Organizing	Influencing	Controlling	
		If a number is entered in a grey square, we need to improve either: - The model - The explanation of the model to make it easier to follow!									
		Theme	Example								
Call to Action	• I need you to do this thing • Your turn to update the document. • Please set up a meeting with the marketing team.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Administration	• Meeting requests • Meeting responses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Networking	• Nice to e-meet you, I think we have mutual interests, would you like to meet up? • It was great to meet you at lunch, let me know if you find out more about Project Nexus.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Building trust & connection	• I know you are waiting on me for this, but there is a delay and I will get it to you soon. • Thank you for doing that, it is important to me.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Information known – not shared or readily available	• When are you free to meet? • Sorry, I have another commitment on Tuesday, how about Thursday? • How many orders do we need to ship next week?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Defective	• This time with the attachment... • Sorry, I sent to the wrong John Smith. • I am writing but this thing should have happened, but it didn't	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Repetition / Duplication	• Following up on my email below, can you provide the information requested? • You have a message waiting in Teams.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Information shared	Waste : • Copying you in for visibility Value: • Here are the prompts I used to develop personas aligned to our customers, they may help you. Managing: • Their project lead is vegetarian, make sure there is an option for them at lunch.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Email with external party	"You need to know this but are outside of my company (so another messaging system may not be appropriate)"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
SPARE		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		
SPARE		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		

Appendix 3 – Example statements for team working agreement

When communicating internally, we will use:

-  Email – for formal issues and where conversation history may be useful
-  Teams chat – for non-urgent collaboration, and to schedule calls
-  WhatsApp – for mission-critical tasks that need action in the next hour
-  Teams calls – if there is a risk of misunderstanding



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This paper is authored with the aim of making the business community more productive and prosperous. Please get in contact if you would like to know more, discuss how to incorporate this approach into your business, or partner in similar work.

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He achieved an undergraduate Master's at the University of Oxford, then completed his doctorate at the University of Cambridge. He left academia for a corporate career of over 20 years. Working in global corporations including BP and Amazon, he has led product, engineering, operations, and supply chain teams in regions spanning the UK, EU, US, and Africa.

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Academic Director and
Professor of Management Practice



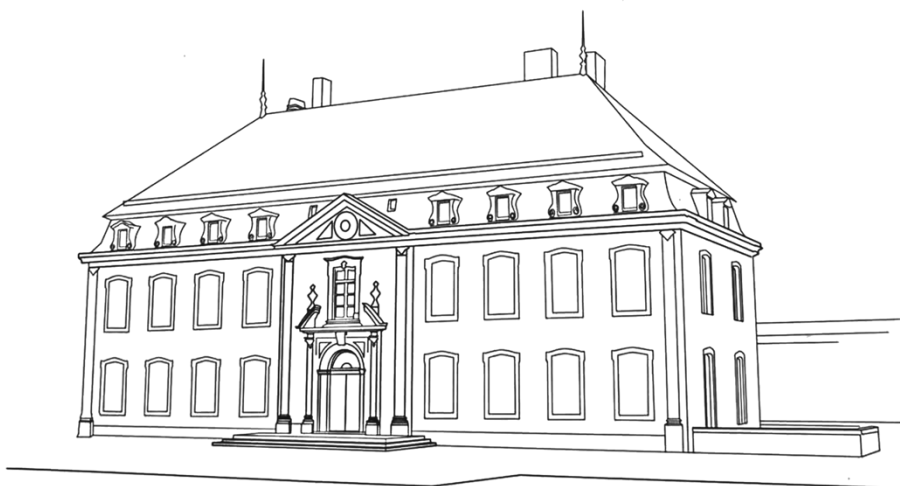
Sebastián J. Olivera

Head of Executive Education

New Campus 2027

Château Septfontaines

The new campus of Luxembourg School of Business is located in a historical area close to the centre of Luxembourg City. This campus will allow us to welcome our participants in a unique, historic, and deeply Luxembourgish context.



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