



How to master email

It doesn't require an MBA. But putting these five simple steps to work will move you ahead of the pack: By managing email overload and ensuring that emails you send will be effective.

By Elizabeth Danziger

Email is both a boon and a bane to business productivity. It speeds transactions, slashes mailing costs and allows you to instantly zap dozens, nay, thousands of people with your messages. However, it also eats up energy. The average businessperson receives more than 100 emails a day. If you spend just two minutes on each email, that's more than 200 minutes or almost half of an eight-hour day. If you spend only 30 seconds on an email, you are still paying a toll in lost concentration and time required to recover from the interruption. According to Basex, a research firm focusing on problems of information overload, recovery time from any brief interruption can be 10 to 20 times the duration of the interruption. Whatever its costs, however, email is a permanent fixture in the business world today. These five tips will help you manage email overload and write emails that people will read.

1. Determine whether email is the right medium for your message.

Have you ever received an email that should have been a phone call? A bank president

told me that he had lunch with a board member and mentioned the possibility of layoffs in the future. When he returned to his office, he saw an email from the person asking, "So when do you plan to fire John?" He phoned the board member and explained that mentioning specific layoff plans was inappropriate in an email.

- Negotiation is usually best done by phone or in person. Use email to confirm what was said in phone calls and personal meetings, not for the negotiation itself.
- If you have gone back and forth more than three times, face it: Email is not working. Pick up the phone.
- If your message is confidential and you do not wish to create a permanent paper trail, avoid email. Use the phone or speak in person.

2. Use the subject line wisely.

There you are, staring at screen after screen of unread emails. How do you decide which to open, which to delete and which to put off for an unspecified later time? First you look at the sender: Is this person a VIP? Is he part of an urgent problem? Those people's emails get opened first. But then you still

have a whole array to choose from. You probably decide which ones to open by looking at the subject line.

- Use the subject line to hook your reader's attention. Think about the Three Ps: purpose, person and point. What is the purpose of your email? What person are you writing to and what matters most to that person? What is your basic point? To the extent that you can touch on one or more of the Three Ps, you will catch your reader's eye.
- Change the subject line when you change the subject.
- Never leave the subject line blank. Many people automatically delete subjectless emails.
- If you are requesting action, say so in the subject line. People do not always read the whole email. If you bury your request at the end, your reader may never see it.

3. Proofread every element, every time, before you hit "send."

A woman was recently sent to me for email coaching. She had a tense relationship with a colleague. She got to the office early one morning and wrote to the person, "Please call me when you get in." An hour later, she received an irate phone call from her manager berating her for her inappropriate email. Puzzled, she went to her sent mail folder. She discovered that what she had actually written was, "Please call me when you get *it*." The offended recipient had forwarded the email to the whole management team. Note that the writer's email would have gone straight through spell-check.

There is no email so short that you cannot get yourself in trouble by not proofreading it. Errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation

diminish readers' respect. Incorrect words, missing text and other content errors damage credibility and can dramatically alter your meaning. True, it takes an extra minute to proofread. But what is the point of sending an email that will make a bad impression?

- Proofread the "To" line, subject line, attachment and text.
- Use spell-check software but do not rely on it exclusively.
- Read important emails aloud to proof them.

4. Remember that emails are public documents.

The Wall Street Journal regularly features incriminating or foolish corporate emails on its front page. Both individuals and corporations have an incredible ability to forget that emails written in the seeming privacy of one's own office may someday be splattered across the front page of the newspaper. Make sure that everyone in your organization understands that if they are unwilling for the contents of an email to be made public, they should not send the email.

- Unwilling to read it in the newspaper or hear it in court? Don't email it.
- Company email belongs to the company. There is no private email at work.
- Avoid writing negatively about other people. These messages come back to haunt their authors.

5. Limit email checking.

According to BBC News, workers distracted by email and phone calls suffer a fall in IQ more than twice that found in marijuana smokers. Those who are constantly breaking away from tasks to react to email or text messages suffer similar effects on the mind

as losing a night's sleep. It is not possible to consistently do quality concentrated work while constantly interrupting yourself to check and send email.

Every time you check email, you suffer a double loss: the time it takes to check and follow up on the email, and the time it takes you to get back on task with what you were doing before you interrupted yourself.

- If your job permits, check email only at natural breaks in your work flow. Do not interrupt yourself to check email. Tell key correspondents to phone you if they have an urgent need to connect.
- Change people's expectations for email replies. Jonathan Spira, CEO of Basex, recommends implementing a 24-hour standard for responding to internal emails unless they are legitimately marked "urgent." If people don't feel they have to respond immediately, they will check less frequently and get more done.
- Disable email auto-alert functions. Check email on *your* schedule, not on the schedule of the people who email you at their convenience.

Email can help or hinder your daily work. Control the email onslaught using the subject line strategically, remembering that emails are not confidential, proofreading conscientiously and pushing back against excessive use of this marvelous but maddening business tool. **ET**

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