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Send Fewer Emails To Engage Deeper

BY DIANNA BOOHER | JAN 04 2020

When you send multiple emails on the same issue (reminders and follow-ups), people begin to tune out-to that specific message and also to the others sent by you.

Tim, a friend of mine back in college, had the weird habit of setting his alarm to go off at 7:00 AM on his day off when he had no intention of getting up early. "Why?" I asked him one day when we were complaining about studying late for exams. "Oh, I don't get up at 7:00! I just love the feeling of slapping off the alarm and knowing that I can roll over and go back to sleep for another 3 hours."

Often during the last three decades, as I have coached, consulted, and keynoted throughout organisations across myriad industries, I have heard a similar sentiment. It is just worded a little differently, "HR sends so much paperwork and nags us for so much information. It feels good just to ignore them."

HR professionals have an essential mission, of course—to recruit, develop, and retain top talent. To create a culture that works for all. Educate about regulations and ensure legal compliance. Yet it is not uncommon to hear these complaints:

- ◆ "HR's unresponsive; they move too slowly."
- ◆ "Go around HR. That just muddies the water."
- ◆ "HR will tie your hands. They are not risk-takers."

Could better—but fewer emails close the gap between those negative perceptions and HR's essential mission? Or in other words, "Do you say too much . . . about too little ... too often? And does this habit bury critical communication employees need to hear?"

The Stats About Overload



We were told more than two decades ago that email would revolutionise the way we work and save us an enormous amount of time. While email has many benefits, it has also engulfed us and created other productivity drains. Booher Research Institute, recently commissioned a survey of email communication habits and productivity from the Social Research Lab at the University of Northern Colorado. A representative sampling of knowledge workers across multiple industries reported about their email habits is reproduced below: -

- ◆ 42 percent spend 3 hours or more per day reading and writing email
- ◆ 55 percent check email either hourly or multiple times per hour
- ◆ 34 percent say the email they get is redundant (meaning they receive duplicate copies) or irrelevant to their needs

Send Fewer Emails to Get Quicker Action

When you send multiple emails on the same issue (reminders and follow-ups), people begin to tune out—to that specific message—and also to the other emails sent by you. In essence, you are "training" readers to ignore "first editions". As with those who hit the snooze button on their alarm clocks, people become accustomed to ignoring the required action until they get several email reminders.

Many conference planners have communicated through this typical "cycle" and learned this principle the hard way. E.g. their annual convention ends in August. They began sending periodic emails, "Sign up now for next year to get a discount". To the speakers, they start a different email series, "Propose to speak". Soon it becomes, "The proposal deadline is coming". Then, "The deadline is about to close". Then, "We're extending the deadline to give you longer to propose".

Then the next series starts, "Submit your materials by X date". Then, "This is a reminder to submit your materials by X date". Then, "This is your last reminder to submit your materials by X date". Then, "We are extending the submission deadline".

You get the idea. Such communication habits sound like a parent's saying to the four year-old, "This is the last time I'm going to tell you this last time to pick up your toys." Lighten your load and stress. Do not train your employees to ignore you.

Engage Fewer People to Get More Responses

Culling your distribution lists for emails you send will likely increase engagement on important projects. As with meetings, the larger the group, the lower the individual participation. When you are emailing a group for input (E.g., a group of managers about their training needs for the new year), the same principle applies. When you copy a large list, people feel anonymous, and fewer feel obligated to respond.

If you want/need input, cut your list, and you will increase response-not to mention clearing inboxes for the uninterested.

Clarify and Adapt to Standard Response Times

Eighty percent of the participants in the UNC survey said they typically expect readers to respond to "important" outside emails within four hours or less, 59 percent expect a response within an hour or less. What is the expected response time in the culture of the team you are serving? Four hours? 24 hours? Should you adapt to it? Are there exceptions? If so, what? If you do not know, find out from the organisational leader.

What is the standard response time expected within your own HR organisation? (If you are the leader, communicate that standard to your team.) Protect your organisational brand and your personal brand by living up to the expectations.

Slow responses suggest many things—most of them negative.

- ◆ You are overwhelmed and cannot keep up with the pace.
- ◆ You are puzzled by the decision or action required.
- ◆ Your system of handling daily inquiries is ineffective.

- ◆ You have a staffing problem.
- ◆ The situation, decision, or project is unimportant to you.
- ◆ You need to gather more information or input before replying.
- ◆ You need time to deliberate before responding.
- ◆ Can you routinely afford to be considered the bottleneck?

Email can be an enormous timesaver—unless poor communication practices diminish its benefits and create an untamed monster. To tame the beast and reclaim your time, send fewer but better emails to engage employees to act on the essential.



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Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 48 books, published in 61 foreign editions. Her latest books include "Faster, Fewer, Better Emails", "Communicate Like a Leader", "What MORE Can I Say?" and "Creating Personal Presence". She has been interviewed for opinions on workplace communication by Good Morning America, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, Forbes, FOX, CNN, NPR, and Entrepreneur. Dianna blogs for Forbes, Microsoft, and The CEO Magazine.

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