

Escape the Email Logjam

How you handle email can make a dent in your credibility and productivity.

BY DIANNA BOOHER

People tackle their email overload in different ways. Take Shelley, for example. She responded to my Facebook post about the goal of a “zero” inbox: “Right now I have more than 3,500 emails in my box. After a while, I just delete them all and start over.” She was one of several who reported an astronomical volume and admitted to dumping them all without reading.

She’s not the lone ranger in being overwhelmed. During an interview with *Newsday* months ago, the reporter told me that he was writing a piece on executives and life balance versus productivity. The reporter passed along this comment from his previous CEO interviewee: “Email is the big disrupter. I have a project that I need to finish this afternoon. It shouldn’t take me more than an hour and a half. But with email popping into my box every few seconds, in reality it will probably take me the rest of the afternoon to finish it.” It was 1:30 p.m.

Email is a much broader issue when poor habits hobble the productivity of an entire organization. In fact, the stats

show speak volumes about this shared productivity problem that email presents. According to a recent survey conducted among knowledge workers by the University of Northern Colorado’s Social Research Lab:

- Forty-two percent of respondents said they spend three or more hours daily on email—almost half their workday.
- Thirty-four percent of their email is either redundant or irrelevant to them.
- Fifty-five percent check their email at least hourly.

Clearly, email has mired us in a logjam, threatening to severely undercut personal and corporate productivity. More specifically, talent development professionals feel the stress of an overflowing inbox when their job takes them away from their computer—while leading a training session or coaching a manager during a major conflict, for example.

So, what are the solutions?



Think well to write well

How you craft an email will free up your time and get you the responses you need.

Send clear, concise, complete email—the first time. Chances are, a parent or teacher scolded you at some point during your youth with this axiom: “If you don’t have time to do it right the first time, how will you ever find time to do it over?”

If poor email writing wasn’t the inspiration for that saying, it certainly could have been. Many people approach email as if rolling a snowball downhill. As it rolls, it grows. At the end of the string of seven emails, the reader finally gets the whole picture.

5

Ways to Tackle Email

1

Think before you draft. Send clear, concise, complete emails focused on your reader’s primary interest and action.

2

Summarize situations and messages succinctly. Ask specific—not general—questions for input and feedback.

Granted, you may be able to shoot off a quick two-sentence reply to someone faster than you can think through your response, give context, and mention safeguards in your answer. But each time the reader replies with another question represents another interruption to your current task.

You think you're finished with that situation—but no. The reply lands in your inbox again—with another question or piece to the puzzle. Another interruption, and another reply is required. Instead of this back-and-forth routine, think the entire situation through first.

- Whom am I writing to?
- What's the reader's primary interest?
- What's the specific message?
- What action do I want from the reader—or what action do I plan to take next based on this message?
- What are the necessary details to include (typically the *why* and *how*)?

Then—and only then—hit Send.

Summarize succinctly. Your email should open with a concise summary message. Far too often, writers try to build their case first with background information before working their way into the real point of the email. That's a wrong move for several reasons:

- Readers may never get to your real message.
- Background information that comes before the message often confuses and leads the reader off-course.
- The reader may arrive at a completely different conclusion than what you intend.

The ability to take vast amounts of information; synthesize it; and shape it into a clear, succinct overview sets you apart as a leader.

Is your response helpful to all others on the distribution list? If not, reply only to the sender.

Ask specific questions for input or feedback. Let's say you're planning to roll out a revised template and want feedback from team members first. Avoid the lazy person's request for input: "Your thoughts?" or "Any ideas or suggestions?" You'll get more usable information if you ask specific questions.

Reduce clutter—yours and theirs

The more emails you send and receive will obviously affect your—and others'—productivity.

Get off outdated distribution lists. Lists often outlive their original purpose. People come and go in their roles; their interests change. But often emailers fail to adjust their distribution lists, so they keep emailing their messages to the same people. Readers see those emails pop into their box and think, "I'm in a hurry now. It's quicker just to delete. I'll email later and tell them I no longer need this document."

However, these unwanted emails clutter your box and bury important items. Make it a point to regularly scan the lists you are subscribed to and evalu-

Increase Productivity and Improve Email Clarity

Get and take faster action on the emails you send by:

- reducing your reach to increase your engagement—make a conscious decision about your email's recipients
- acknowledging requests so people don't have to send reminders and follow-ups—if you can't answer fully, tell the requester when you do plan to provide more or full information
- changing the subject line on long threads when the topic changes
- dealing with your email once rather than using your inbox for storing your to-do list—decide, do, delegate, or delete
- using <EOM> (end of message) in the subject line so others can decide or delete from the preview window
- stopping PR campaigns (emails meant for self-promotion, pressure, or embarrassment)
- staying on one channel—don't chase people from channel to channel (email, text, phone, social media), clogging up all their communication media.

3

Reduce clutter and redundancy by getting off outdated distribution lists, culling your own distribution lists, using Reply All purposefully, and refraining from meaningless email responses.

4

Use appropriate tools for scheduling or collaborating. Use email only for correspondence.

5

Organize your documents, files, and subfolders to easily find what you need to send an email or respond quickly.

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ate whether they're still useful for you. Unsubscribe if they're more often a headache than a resource.

Use appropriate tools for the tasks.

Are you still trying to use email for projects that other software handles better than email—such as project management or scheduling software? When email first became common decades ago, it was the tool of choice for everything. But not anymore. Is your team forced to use nonproductive tools to collaborate with you because you haven't embraced the new technology?

Use Reply All purposefully. Reply All can clutter inboxes quickly. Instead, send your congratulatory comment, thanks, or invitation directly to a specific person. Why clog up 17 other inboxes, only to have 17 echoes?

Here's a good rule of thumb on the Reply All feature: Is your response helpful to all others on the distribution list? If not, reply only to the sender.

Stop hanging on and piling on with meaningless responses. The following email sequence between two people may strike a familiar chord:

Adam: I've attached a draft report.

Susan: OK. Thanks.

Adam: You're welcome. Let me know when finished.

Susan: Will do! Probably will finish by Thursday.

Adam: That works.

Susan: Maybe sooner.

Adam: Fine. No problem.

Enough already. Yes, these emails are short, and they don't take much time to write or read. However, they clutter and distract from more important work.

Another clutter habit is piling on. For example, Francesca sends out a summary report for the quarter, giving her team a chance to review it before she sends it up the ladder to the executive management team. Nine responses flood your inbox: "Looks good." "Sounds great." "Perfect." "Great summary." "Nothing to add." "You've covered it!"

These are all distractions as they pop into your inbox. Sure, such emails may build camaraderie—but they can irritate and overwhelm on a busy day.

Help others break the routine habit of piling on. As the sender, state in your email: "I'm enclosing the quarterly head count report for your review before I forward it to the executive team. If you have anything to add or correct, reply to me directly. Otherwise, no reply is necessary."

Organize what you need

Easily find what you need when you need it.

Stop slogging through disorganized documents and files. Of the University of Northern Colorado survey respondents, 31 percent said they spend more than 20 minutes per day looking for information to include in emails or for documents to attach. That's too long. Adding an attachment should take less than 10 seconds.

If you're clicking around from folder to folder trying to find information, consider that a clear sign that you need to either retitle or reorganize. Set up a filing system that makes sense for your workflow. Emails alone won't solve your efficiency problem.

Title files, folders, and documents consistently. If your files sport inconsistent titles, you'll spend unnecessary time skimming for what you want. To find files and information quickly, title consistently.

Use the "genre" concept—going from largest category to more specific. For example, Movies>Classics>Romance>Romeo and Juliet. Also, keep dates consistent with the year first, followed by the month, then the day. That way they'll align when sorted alphabetically or numerically.

To tame the email monster, think first, structure well, cut the clutter, and title and file documents systematically. Lead the campaign to change unproductive communication habits throughout your organization. The result? Faster, fewer, better emails and more time for you to focus on core work.

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