Master Emails and Electronic Communication

Step 9

Overview

Enhance email efficiency.

Craft explicit, action-generating subject lines.

Follow email etiquette.

Compose mobile-friendly emails and professional text messages.

How did we ever manage without email? Some of us remember the last century when we mailed letters, sent faxes, and left lots of voicemails. Today, email rules as the number one business communication method, despite the explosion of social media (see step 10) and other new channels that continue to emerge.

Email is an amazing tool. Well-constructed email messages can provide clear directions that promote efficiency, build morale, solidify key relationships, generate leads, and offer many other benefits. But emails can also cause problems that didn’t exist in the pre-Internet era. It’s the ultimate double-edged sword—and we all have our share of horror stories, including emails that were sent to the wrong person or shouldn’t have been sent at all. And you’ve undoubtedly been on the receiving end of nasty or condescending emails that make you want to punch the screen or throw your mobile device against the wall!

Plus, email is an enormous time waster. A study by Inc. revealed that the average U.S. worker spent six hours a day checking emails (James 2015). Are you kidding me? How do organizations get anything done? And the number of emails continues to skyrocket, about 120 per day per person in the latest count, according to the Radicati Group (2015)—thanks in part to mobile devices that allow us to send emails anytime and anywhere. The more emails we send, the more replies we receive—and spend precious time processing them. Every five emails sent generate an average of three replies; eliminating one out of every five emails would cut the number of incoming emails by 12 percent and free up our time for other tasks (Song, Halsey, and Burress 2007).

This step will explain the most important practices for maximizing efficiency with emails and other electronic communication tools.

Reduce the Number of Emails

Given the startling amount of time spent on electronic communication in the workplace, everyone should strive to become more efficient with emails. Still, some of the strategies that follow may need to be adjusted based on the culture of your organization, as well as the preference of your supervisor, client, and other readers.

Don’t Always Reply All

We all receive emails that we couldn’t care less about. Let’s say the purchasing administrator emails 15 team leaders asking what supplies they need. By force of habit,12 of them hit reply all, filling everyone’s inboxes with every detail. Does every other team leader need to know that Maria needs two boxes of copy paper, 75 three-ring binders, and a dozen staple removers?

While you can’t control others’ email habits, you can help unclog co-workers’ inboxes by not hitting reply all unless necessary. And when requesting information from many colleagues, consider asking them to “reply to me only.”

See what happens when everyone continues to cc everyone in the original email chain:

Email String

1. From Suman to Jennifer (cc Carlos)

Carlos and I are in the process of modifying ABC Industries’ cybersecurity plan and we need the one-page technical guidelines you developed last year.

2. From Jennifer to Suman and Carlos

Please see the attached guidelines and keep me posted on how the project is going or if you have technical issues.

3. From Carlos to Jennifer (cc Suman)

Thanks very much, Jennifer.

4. From Carlos to Suman (cc Jennifer)

I’ll revise the text and incorporate the technical specs from Jennifer’s guidelines.

5. From Suman to Carlos (cc Jennifer)

Perfect, Carlos. I’ll await your revisions. Meanwhile, I’ll schedule a date when you and I can meet with Julie at ABC to show her the new plan.

6. From Carlos to Suman (cc Jennifer)

That sounds good, Suman. Please make it Wednesday or Thursday in one of the next two weeks.

7. From Suman to Carlos (cc Jennifer)

No problem, Carlos. Those days should work for me too.

After email 3 (Carlos thanks Jennifer for her assistance), Jennifer no longer needs to be copied. Emails 4 to 7, dealing with drafting the cybersecurity plan and arranging a meeting with Julie at ABC Industries, don’t involve Jennifer. So by copying her on those four emails, Suman and Carlos are clogging up Jennifer’s inbox and wasting her time.

A better approach: Suman and Carlos should wait until the new cybersecurity plan is approved by ABC Industries (assuming no technical problems requiring Jennifer’s assistance) and then email Jennifer a brief update about the client’s reaction, while thanking her for her support.

Don’t Acknowledge Every Email

In your effort to be courteous, you may be wasting your time—and the reader’s time. Check out this all-too-common exchange between two colleagues, even when they work on the same floor:

Andre: I misplaced your suggestions for the status update that you emailed last week. Please resend.

Sarah: See the requested suggestions below.

Andre: Thanks, Sarah.

Sarah: No problem.

While few would disagree that Sarah’s “No problem” wasn’t necessary, Andre’s “Thanks, Sarah” was also a waste of time. I’m not telling you to be rude; just differentiate between a useful reply and a needless “thank you.” As long-time colleagues, Andre and Sarah shouldn’t be wasting their time on trivial acknowledgments. But if you’re the devil’s advocate, you may ask what the big deal is. It takes less than 30 seconds to read and delete the email, right? Yes, but those half-minutes can quickly turn into hours of unproductive time.

Use discretion before sending that acknowledgment. Consider the topic, time sensitivity, and the sender’s expectations.

Avoid Instinctive “I’ll Get Back to You” Replies

Many individuals are conditioned to respond immediately to nearly every email, to notify the sender that they received it and are working on getting the required information. That’s another time-waster—which I’m guilty of frequently, including a few years ago, while replying to an affiliate with whom I had been working for three years:

Brian (September 20, 11 a.m.): I need your vehicle information for our October 10 presentation at YXZ Company. Please email it to me by September 25.

Jack (September 20, 12:30 p.m.): I’m tied up in a workshop all day so I’ll email this to you as soon as I can.

Jack (September 21, 9:30 a.m.): Below is my vehicle information that you requested.

Soon after I sent my September 20 email, I realized how unnecessary it was. The next morning, I sent Brian the requested information, four days ahead of his deadline. In most cases, you don’t need to update the person that you will take care of their request later; just wait until you’re finished and send it.

Do some individuals want an immediate response for every email to make sure you’ve received it? Sure, so identify them and try not to send unnecessary replies to those who don’t need them. Again, it goes back to your organization’s culture and the sender’s preferences.

Know When to—and When Not to—Email

An email (or text) is not always the most efficient way to communicate. Still, many of us get caught in a string of emails that ends up wasting everyone’s time. See the following email conversation between two co-workers from different offices looking to set up a conference call:

February 5—Alison (Houston office): I suggest we set up a call with the Houston and Atlanta supervisors during the week of March 19 to discuss changes in the corporate advisory practice. What day and time would work on your end?

February 6—Ramon (Atlanta office): I don’t know. Our managers have told me that they don’t believe these calls are very productive.

February 7—Alison: I’m aware that they weren’t happy with prior calls, so we’ve prepared a detailed agenda.

February 8—Ramon: The other issue with previous calls, according to our managers, was the lack of follow-up.

February 9—Alison: Are they talking about weekly or biweekly updates, follow-up phone calls, or other issues?

Five emails and several days later, Alison and Ramon still haven’t scheduled the call. Both neglected a critical business tool—the telephone! Had one of them called the other, the meeting could’ve been scheduled in two minutes. Then, Alison or Ramon could’ve sent a brief email documenting the agreed-upon details.

If you find yourself in the middle of a useless email string, pick up the phone! You could save a lot of time on both ends. For those in organizations that use Outlook Invite or other calendar programs, follow the protocol for arranging meetings—but don’t waste time on an email string to nowhere.

Write More Productive Emails

To further boost productivity, construct concise and explicit emails that make it easier for the other person to reply and help you work more efficiently.

Be Explicit About What You Want

Your emails should address the big picture to determine, for example, how to complete a project as efficiently as possible. Take this approach whether you’re starting an email conversation or replying to one of the messages. See how efficiency improves with each version of an email dialogue between Susan and Omar:

Email Dialogue 1: Lots of Wasted Emails

Susan: Please prepare your Q1 expense summary. Let me know if you need expense reports for any prior months and if you can email it to me by April 20. (Sender clearly states action required)

Omar: OK, I’ll see what I can do. (Worthless response)

Omar (two days later): I’m working on the summary now and will soon let you know which expense reports I need. (Another worthless response)

Omar: I need the January and February expense reports. (Finally, he explains what he needs.)

Susan: I’m tied up for the next week. By when do you need these expense reports?

Omar: I need them by April 10, so I can finish the summary by April 20.

Email Dialogue 2: A Bit Better

Susan: Please prepare your Q1 expense summary. Let me know if you need expense reports for any prior months and if you can email it to me by April 20.

Omar: I need the January and February expense reports.

Susan: I’m tied up for the next week. By when do you need these reports?

Omar: I need them by April 10, so I can finish the summary by April 20.

Email Dialogue 3: Efficient, With Explicit Emails From Both Parties

Susan: Omar, please prepare your Q1 expense summary. Let me know if you need expense reports for any prior months and if you can email it to me by April 20.

Omar: Please email me the expense reports for January and February by April 10, and I’ll submit the expense summary by April 20. (He explains what he needs and by when.)

See this other example illustrating the importance of being explicit, where Larry is trying to schedule a training for his staff with Fang, the conference manager:

Larry: I need to arrange a leadership training course for midlevel managers in March. Are there any training rooms available?

Fang: Let me know how many managers need to be trained so I can provide a suitable room.

Larry: We’re looking to put 15 to 20 people through the course.

Fang: I suggest the Royal Conference Room on the fourth floor, which will easily accommodate 20 people.

Larry: Sounds good. Will that room be available during the weeks of March 12 or 19?

Fang: I have Monday, March 12, and Friday, March 23.

Larry: I’d like to avoid Mondays or Fridays. Is there any availability on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays during those weeks?

Fang: The room will be free on Tuesday, March 13, but only until 1:30 p.m.

Larry: That’ll work, because the course is four hours. We can run it from 9 to 1.

Fang: You’re confirmed for the Royal Conference Room on Tuesday, March 13. You may use it from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

It took 10 emails for Larry to arrange the training with Fang. Let’s see what happens when Larry is explicit from the start:

Larry: I need to reserve a room for a leadership training course for midlevel managers in March. Please review the details below and let me know what’s available.

Leadership training:

4 hours

15 to 20 midlevel managers

Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday during the week of March 12 or 19.

Fang: I can give you the Royal Conference Room on the fourth floor, which can easily accommodate 20 people, on Tuesday, March 13, from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Larry: That’s perfect! We’re confirmed for then.

Spur Action With Explicit Subject Lines

How do you decide which emails to open first—or at all? Naturally, it depends on the sender; you’ll probably open emails from your boss, a client, or another important party as soon as possible. Otherwise, the subject line is the most critical factor. If a subject line is vague or confusing, you may disregard that email, at least for the time being. Plus, when reading emails on your mobile device, you’re more likely to just scan subject lines without reading the body of the messages—which you may read later or not at all.

Pointer

Write explicit subject lines for your email so recipients will open them quickly.<end>

So as the sender, make your subject lines precise and engaging to increase the chances that the reader will open your email sooner and take the desired action, which will ultimately enhance your productivity.

Compare these three pairs of subject lines:

Vague: Reps’ Latest Rating

Explicit: Reps’ Rating Drops 12% | Need Training

What receiver may think upon reading: “I better start planning a training program for the reps.”

Vague: Upcoming Budget Meeting

Explicit: May 6 Budget Meeting | Agenda May 3

What receiver may think upon reading: “I need to begin working on the agenda.”

(Note: To create the vertical bar separating the explicit subject line, type the shift and slash keys together.)

Vague: Launch Date

Explicit: Please Approve June 8 Launch Date

What receiver may think upon reading: “I need to decide whether to approve June 8 as a launch date.”

Not only is each of these emails with an explicit subject line more likely to be opened sooner than its more-nebulous version, it should prompt the reader to take action—before they read the text of the message.

Don’t Be a Lazy Subject Liner

When emailing someone with whom you haven’t corresponded in a while (say several months), you may be tempted to search for the last time this person emailed you and simply reply. That’s fine, but don’t be too lazy to modify the original subject line, which may be unrelated to the topic of your new email. See what happened when Rich didn’t bother to change the subject line:

From Christina to Rich (February 20)

Subject line: Q2 Budget Forecasts

Text of email: Please email me your Q2 budget worksheet by March 1.

Eight months later, Rich needs Christina’s input on performance reviews. But he’s too lazy to change the subject line.

From Rich to Christina (October 22)

Subject line: Re: Q2 Budget Forecasts

Text of email: I’m working on performance reviews. Please email me your scores for the three clerks on your team by October 29.

When Christina, inundated with emails, quickly scans her inbox and sees Rich’s subject line, she thinks to herself, “Why is Rich contacting me about the budget worksheets from more than six months ago?” Then she might move onto other emails, leaving Rich without the information he needs before his deadline. Had Rich been more diligent and inserted a new subject line, such as, Need Clerks’ Reviews by Oct. 29, he probably would’ve received Christina’s input in time.

To further improve email efficiency, sharpen your overall writing ability. The other skills addressed in this book—including brevity, organization, tone, and grammar—can all be applied to emails.

Mind Your Etiquette

While many organizations have their own set of rules for sending and receiving emails—frequently related to compliance—follow these practices, universally accepted as proper etiquette:

Make Sure Each Email Would Meet Everyone’s Approval

An email is a permanent and documented message, which can be retrieved at any time. Only send messages that comply with your organization’s rules and that you would be comfortable showing to any individual at any level or an outside authority. For example, as a midlevel manager, you should never send this type of email criticizing direct reports and the organization’s hiring practice: The new IT assistants don’t know the first thing about technology. Where do they find these losers? If HR department employees or company leaders were to see this email, it would reflect poorly on you as a manager.

Don’t Take Shortcuts With Grammar and Syntax

Working professionals used to print out letters, memos, reports, and other documents, sometimes on company letterhead, and mail them out (occasionally, this is still done). The act of producing a physical document compelled employees to carefully review their text and revise if necessary. But the ease of delivering a message with a few keystrokes has resulted in carelessness with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure, not to mention sheer laziness in not using actual words.

Pointer

When writing emails, don’t cheat on grammar and don’t use funky fonts or text-messaging abbreviations.

Some write emails like a text message (more on texting later). So instead of sending a polished request, See the operations report for January and email me your comments, they shoot off emails that read, c op rpt 4 jan coments bak 2 me. Once the reader deciphers what the text-speak means (a waste of time and drain on productivity), they will likely consider you less professional.

Avoid Blank Subject Lines

Give your readers a break and clue them in on what the message is about. With the hundreds of emails today’s business workers receive, people tend to treat subject lines like headlines in a newspaper or online news outlet: They scan the subject lines and decide which email to open first (as discussed already). A blank subject line can give others the impression that you assume they will open their emails by default, despite not knowing what to expect.

Don’t Put the Entire Message in the Subject Line

We’ve all worked with this co-worker before: You boot up your email in the morning and run into Can you please review the budget analysis and provide me feedback on the key sections by Feb. 10. Such a long subject line, while not as bad as no subject line, is difficult to read on mobile devices (see more on making emails mobile-friendly later in this step). A better way to convey this request would be to use a specific subject line, while including the details in the body of the email:

Subject: Budget Analysis Feedback by Feb. 10

Text of message: Please review the budget analysis and provide feedback on the key sections by February 10.

Avoid Putting “Urgent” in the Subject Line

If you want to be known as the panicked employee who needs an immediate response to every issue to avoid a nervous breakdown, then write urgent in the subject line. Otherwise, keep urgent out of your subject lines. While teaching an undergraduate course several years ago, I had one student who repeatedly wrote urgent when sending me emails. Then the message read something like this: “Professor, on the next assignment, should it be three paragraphs or four paragraphs?” In this case, urgent was in the eye of the beholder.

Instead, use explicit subject lines and then persuade your reader to action with techniques found elsewhere in this book. Tool 9-1 offers additional advice to help you keep your email professional.

Tool 9-1

Email Etiquette Quick Tips

For Important Audiences, Use Salutations and Sign-Offs

When emailing senior executives, clients, and other important readers (use your judgment), don’t simply begin your message, which can be perceived as too informal. Start with a salutation such as, “Dear Ms. Walker, “Hi Steve,” or simply, “Lauren.” And sign off with something like, “Thanks,” “Best regards,” or “Best.”

Close With a Friendly Outreach

Some argue that ending an email with, “Please contact me if you have any questions,” is unnecessary, because the reader knows that they can reply with inquiries. Still, this type of closing sets a positive tone and conveys an important message to the reader—that their opinion matters.

Don’t Use All Caps—AND I MEAN IT

An email written in all caps is the written equivalent of shouting. Avoid using email to express anger at someone (See step 6 on tone).

Avoid Funky Fonts

Not only do artsy and cutesy fonts come across unprofessionally (in most organizations), they can become garbled and unreadable in other email systems.

Stay Away From Colored Backgrounds

Like funky fonts, colored backgrounds can be construed as unprofessional and can make text hard to read.

Save Religious and Spiritual Signatures for Personal Emails

Religious and spiritual messages don’t belong on business emails (unless your organization is an institution of this type). Feel free to use an uplifting signature like, “Make it a fulfilling day,” but nothing stronger than that.

Lose the Emojis and Emoticons

In many situations, emojis and emoticons can come across as unprofessional. Still, I must admit that some clients and respected colleagues have sent me emails with emojis. Stay away from them unless you’re certain that your supervisor or other key people in the company would approve.

Make It Mobile Friendly

Today, more than 60 percent of emails are opened on mobile devices rather than on desktop or laptop computers (Lewkowicz 2016). And this percentage will continue to rise along with the use of mobile devices. Here are the most important tips for ensuring that mobile readers can easily process your emails:

Increase the Font Size

Use at least 12- or 14-point type so the reader doesn’t need to squint to read your message. And consider making links even larger.

Limit Subject Lines to 40-45 Characters

If you’ve got too much information to fit within this limit, put the most important message first, as in this example:

Audit Report Revisions May 7 | Senior Partners Must Approve

Be Careful With Bullet Symbols

The different styles of bullet points that Word offers don’t always display properly in an email (mobile or otherwise). So stick with simple hyphens or asterisks, as in these two examples:

Among the most profitable products:

-sports drinks

-energy bars

-flavored water.

The keys to marketing success:

\*an engaging message

\*integrated tactics

\*quick follow-up.

Use Single Columns

Text in multiple columns sometimes appears condensed and can be difficult to navigate with certain mobile devices and email systems. Stick with single columns, which will also help you highlight key content.

Be Sure Your Call to Action Stands Out

Make your desired action clearly visible and clickable if you’re directing readers to a link. In the following example, the link to the shipping protocol is bolded:

Please review and approve the shipping protocol.

Separate Links With White Space

Avoid closely stacked links, which may cause users to click the wrong one. Compare these two versions (links are bolded):

Too Tight—Can Lead to Errors

Learn more about these options for configuring the training room:

Classroom

U-shaped conference table

Clusters

Breathing Space—Easier to Click the Right One

Learn more about these options for configuring the training room:

Classroom

U-shaped conference table

Clusters

Avoid Large Images

You don’t want mobile-device readers frustrated by long delays before your image downloads. Consider shrinking images that may be too large—and then emailing them to yourself so you can test on your mobile device.

Text Like a Professional

Today, business texting (usually through SMS or IM) plays a critical role in helping working professionals communicate faster, internally and externally. About 80 percent of businesspeople text as part of their jobs, according to a 2015 survey conducted by Instantly and commissioned by RingCentral. And nearly 70 percent of employees think their organizations should use texting to communicate internally, according to a 2014 survey by the Vitiello Communications Group.

The first step for enhancing your workplace text messaging is to follow the same guidelines for emails: Keep them brief, get to the point quickly, give clear instructions, check your grammar, and use actual words. Still, texting presents other challenges and opportunities. Here are some tips to maximize your workplace texting efficiency:

Avoid Acronyms and Abbreviations

Don’t use acronyms or abbreviations (a staple in personal texting) unless you’re certain that the receiver knows what you mean. Overusing any type of shorthand could leave your recipient confused and force them to seek out a definition in another app, all to avoid appearing dumb or naïve by not knowing it right away.

Divide Long Messages Into Multiple Texts

Instead of cramming too much information and overusing abbreviations to avoid exceeding the character limit, send two or three separate messages. Though that means the individual will receive multiple rings or vibrations, they’ll appreciate a more readable message.

Limit How Much Information You’re Asking For

Unlike an email, which can accommodate extensive information (such as with bulleted lists), a text message should be limited to one or two requests. While some people have honed their typing dexterity on mobile devices, you still put a strain on them and less-dexterous users when asking them to type a long reply. Plus, if you ask the reader to research an issue and then report back through text, you’re likely asking them to toggle between devices (a computer to research, and a mobile device to reply).

Enable the Reader to Reply Quickly

Structure your text message so the reader can reply immediately with a minimum number of words. An example:

We will ship your parts by 5/12, 10 a.m. CT. Please provide reply with this information:

Building number and floor:

On-site contact and cell number:

Preference—1 large or 3 small containers (indicate 1 or 3):

Know When to Text—and Not to Text

Based on the situation and your organizational culture, determine when text messaging would be the appropriate communication channel as opposed to email or phone. For example, if you need a response within 24 to 48 hours, an email may be the most appropriate medium. But if you’re facing a tight deadline and need your supervisor’s approval within the hour, a text would probably work best.

Respond to Texts as Soon as Possible

This boils down to practicing what you preach. Text messages carry an inherent immediacy about them. Recognize that the sender probably needs your reply within 20 to 30 minutes, just as you do whenever shooting off a text message to a co-worker. You don’t want to be known as the one in the office who demands an instant response but doesn’t return the favor.

Your Turn

Enhancing the efficiency of your emails and texts requires a variety of strategies to help you save time and compose more effective messages. To hone your email and texting skills, try these exercises:

Review this string of messages between two colleagues who have worked together for several years, and determine which of these emails (one or more) aren’t necessary:

Rosa: Please complete the Q4 progress report for XB within two weeks (by January 21) so I can submit it to management for approval.

Marc: I will get it to you as soon as I can.

Rosa: Thanks. I appreciate that.

Marc: Should it include a summary of prior XB progress reports? And, if so, how far back should I go?

Rosa: Can you access these prior reports?

Marc: Yes, I can access XB progress reports from the past two years.

Rosa: Email the past three XB progress reports covering the first three quarters of last year.

Write an explicit subject line for this email to your supervisor—designed to get them to open the email as soon as possible:

Our team has developed a plan to significantly increase the number of inquiries while lowering online marketing expenses. By dividing these costs equally among all the divisions, we could send 12 more email blasts in a year and expand our reach with mobile advertising by 25 percent. According to our analysis, by next year, this plan could produce an average of 30 inquiries a month instead of our current average of 15 per month.

Reorganize this text message to make it easy for the reader to quickly submit the required information:

I need to confirm details for the June 1 presentation skills training. I need to know how many of your direct reports will attend. Which location (River Road or Sax Plaza) is best for them? And what is their preferred starting times. The trainer can begin at 8, 8:30, or 9.

The Next Step

While the vast majority of working professionals worldwide regularly write and receive emails, considerably fewer compose social media messages as part of their jobs. But that’s changing, as an increasing number of organizations are calling on their employees to generate text for social media channels. So you need to be ready. That’s what we’ll cover in step 10 (Apply Writing Skills to Social Media Copy).