



Send: Twelve Ways to Make Email Productive Again

Executive Summary

Introduction

Email. The killer app of the 1990s is now simply killing us. We used to receive one or two messages a day, and then it was several. The inbound flow swelled to dozens a day and has now reached dozens per hour.

Sadly, business use of email continues to grow. Stemming the tide is not within our control, but *how* we use email to communicate with each other is. Below are twelve suggestions on how email can deliver on its promise of global, near-instantaneous communication that gets things done.

Better Email Mechanics

Compose, Send, Reply—those are email's basic mechanics. Yet, email use has created several related behaviors that are inefficient and contribute to excessive message flow. Do any of the following ring a bell?

1. No Hiding Behind Email

Email is an asynchronous communication tool, which means the communication between senders and receivers does not occur at the same time. For example, an email can be sent at 10:00 a.m. and not read until 2:00 p.m. It took four hours for that message to be communicated. Obviously, email is not a reliable way to communicate urgent information.

The point is that email is better suited for some types of communication than others. Specifically, email is great for transmitting static information rather than dynamic information. Examples include giving background, providing direction on a task, or updating someone on a meeting.



Using email to conduct a dynamic conversation or develop a plan is *not* as good of a use. In fact, it's really hiding behind email. Instead, schedule a call or meeting to engage in the back-and-forth flow of information best suited for synchronous (real-time) communication.

2. Love Reply; Loathe Reply All

Replying to messages is another great feature in email. Unfortunately, we tend to automatically hit *Reply All* for every response. It has become a habit—a bad one. Reply All is a great feature if (a) a historical record is required for the communication or (b) if every recipient on the thread needs the information being communicated. However, there are many times when neither of these reasons exists. One way to reduce the overall flow of email is to stop and consider whether every person on the existing thread needs the information the reply will provide. Stop. Consider. That's all. Imagine if we all hit reply just 20 percent less? We'd all receive fewer emails we never needed in the first place!

3. The Collective Thank-You

Email is a hybrid form of communication. It's a combination of live conversation and a written letter. A persistent bad habit in email is the endless series of thank-yous that get sent. They're unnecessary and insincere. They serve only to clutter up inboxes everywhere.

Thank-you emails are regularly used in conversation to express gratitude. They're quick and the recipient can detect sincerity (or the lack thereof). They're misplaced in emails due to its written format. Consider this: Back in the letter-writing era, did we ever send a letter with only "thank you" in the body? Of course not; it would have been ridiculous. Well...?

Thanking someone for his or her effort can be done sincerely by periodically sending them a separate missive to that effect, or even calling them!

4. Be Jekyll and Hyde

Another seemingly efficient, but ultimately inefficient, email habit is maintaining only a single account. The logic of a single email account is that all messages flow to one place. The single-inbox logic fails because email is very distracting. For example, our focus on work can be derailed by a personal message popping into the inbox at an inopportune moment. Similarly, the enjoyment of a personal moment can be extinguished by an unreasonable demand from work.



Set up two email accounts: one for personal email and one for professional email. Focus primarily on the appropriate email at the appropriate time: work during work hours and personal during personal time. Checking the other account is always allowed; the goal here is to focus on the pertinent email at the right time.

5. The Ten-Second Rule

David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, made the two-minute rule famous. The rule states that we should handle something right now (versus defer doing it) if it takes less than two minutes to accomplish.

It's a good rule, but it doesn't work in email because virtually everything we do in email takes less than two minutes. We would never leave the inbox if we applied Allen's two-minute rule!

Reducing the period from two minutes to ten seconds keeps the spirit and efficiency of Allen's rule. Stated directly: if something in the inbox takes less than ten seconds to dispense with, dispense with it now instead of deferring action until later. Ten-second items include quick replies, approvals, and other short tasks. Things that require any level of thought will take more than ten seconds, so queue those items up for later.

6. The Buck Stops Here

President Harry Truman made this phrase famous during his tenure in office. The message he sent was that he was ultimately responsible for everything his administration did. Slightly adjusting the concept provides similar value to email management.

Specifically, email is not a closed-loop system. An email can be missed or forgotten by the recipient. There's no handshake as it relates to the work being performed. Sure, we receive a mail-fail notice for emails that cannot be delivered, and we might even get an acknowledgement back from the recipient. What about tracking the follow-up? How can we make the buck stop with us to ensure the associated work gets one?

Creating a follow-up system for email involving work ensures that assignments are not forgotten and deadlines are not missed. Are open items left in the inbox? Is there a separate list to track who's doing what? Develop a tracking system that ensures the buck stops right here.



Email is communication's modern marvel. As a hybrid of speaking and writing, we can communicate across great distances and multiple time zones. Adopting a few of the above suggestions can make that communication more efficient and effective.

Better Email Messaging

As noted above, email is a hybrid communication style. It's used conversationally, but in written form. It's more casual than a letter but not as quick or complete as a live conversation. Messages sent by email can be more effective if we blend the best parts of letter writing with the more efficient parts of speaking.

1. Mind the Subject Line

Every email contains a subject line. Every recipient of every email sees the subject line. This is a great place to improve email messaging. Here are some examples of good and bad subject lines:

Bad Subject Line

- Question
- Meeting Tomorrow
- Need Information

Good Subject Line

- Question—Thompson Matter—Deadline=End of Business Today
- Meeting Tomorrow—Smith Matter—2:00 p.m. Eastern—Conf Rm 12 North
- Need Information—Robertson Deal—Deadline=Tuesday at Noon Eastern

The bad subject lines tell the reader little, requiring the email to be opened and read before any meaningful action occurs. That's a waste of time. The good subject lines tell the recipients what they need to know without ever opening the message. They're more effective and more efficient. Moreover, finding and filing the good-subject-line emails are much easier.

2. Give Good Signature

Put all relevant contact information in the signature block of every email sent. Name, phone number, firm name and website are the minimum items of information that produce a good signature block.



Doing so makes it easy for the recipient to contact us if necessary. Most email programs allow for automatic signature block insertion, which means it takes no additional effort to do this once it's set up.

3. Rules of the Road

Email conversations lean toward the casual. It's a nice way to communicate, but it can also create problems. Emails are often forwarded to others, or others are added to conversation threads midstream. What was originally an innocuous statement can take on a whole new meaning when viewed by a newcomer. Informal email tone is fine, provided it remains professional. Furthermore, never put in writing anything that wouldn't be appropriate if said out loud in a group. Finally, double-check grammar and spelling. It demonstrates attention to detail.

4. Deliver the Goods...First

The most effective way to communicate quickly in email is to put the conclusion first. If it's a recommendation, state it immediately. If it's a question, ask it up front. Follow the conclusion with the supporting information. This informs the reader regarding what's needed and provides the detail after the action/question is stated.

5. Be Responsalicious

Yup, that word is made up. The point is that every email reply must be complete. It must address all questions asked and points made. Too often, we review emails quickly and respond to the first question or item only to receive a follow-up reply asking us for answers to other questions. This is a waste of time for everyone concerned and can be avoided by slowing down to ensure that the reply is a complete response to the original email before hitting Send.

6. Write a Screenplay

Drafting a multirecipient email is fraught with risk of confusion unless it's well composed. Direction is needed to ensure that the information and action items stated are communicated to the correct people. Start by providing general information, then use specific references for action items and other directives. Here's an example for a multirecipient email that's well composed:



General Information: We'll be closing the Smith deal on Thursday, June 6. Closing will be held at 11:00 a.m. in Conference Room A. I'd like everyone on this thread to be there.

Jane: Please contact opposing counsel and the client to confirm the date, time, and location with them.

John: Please prepare all closing documents and get them to Susan for final review no later than Tuesday, June 4.

Susan: You'll be running the closing. Please make sure you have adequate time to review the documents John delivers to you and have sufficient copies prepared for signature and distribution.

Questions: Please direct all questions to me via separate email.

This example communicates a tremendous amount of information and clearly directs the actions. It also provides a mechanism for any questions to be answered that doesn't interrupt the other team members' efforts.

Crafting succinct and clear messages to email recipients reduces unnecessary requests for clarification. Implement one or two of the above suggestions to make email flow more effectively and efficiently in your world.

Conclusion

Email is a vital business tool. Making it an effective communication tool requires a blending of some old and some new techniques. Applying the suggestions above will make email more efficient and a clearer hybrid way to communicate globally.