New ideas for managing email

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Despite ever-sophisticated email software with dazzling benefits and features and spam filters, for HR professionals everywhere, managing the daily email beast is becoming more difficult. Certainly vital messages you receive in the course of the day or a week, merit a significant allocation of resources. When your time and efforts are driven by email, the type of things you're going to complete will likely be different, lesser in magnitude, and less satisfying than those you achieve when you stick to your objectives and short-term goals.

Email is, after all, a tool, something like mail, something like the phone. While email and instant messaging take the place of face-to-face communication, special deliveries, occasional meetings, and having to verbally converse with others, all of those functions, as convenient and critical as they might be, do not represent a substitute for you taking control of your activities, time and day.

Here are some personal guidelines I've collected over the years, including those that I've gleaned from highly efficient email correspondents, as well as a few I've developed on my own.

No Complaints by Email
If you have a complaint or grievance, it's best to phone it in. There are subtleties in your voice that can't be conveyed by email. Also, you don't know when and where someone might retrieve your message, and depending on the level of your dissatisfaction, the recipient might take things totally out of context.

If you receive a complaint from an email correspondent, once again, get on the phone. A quick phone reply to an unhappy email correspondent can go a long way in resolving the issue. If your respond by email, you might be lucky and resolve the issue then and there, or you might incur a long trail of email messages back and forth that, after considerable effort, finally equal the same solution that you could have devised over the phone in a matter of minutes.

Email Only During the Workday
Many people resolutely believe that they need to be "on" all day long. This means they address emails that come in after hours and on weekends. Some people are concerned that if they don't respond as soon as a message comes in, they might be seen as lazy.

More often than not, you do get a "pass" when it comes to emails sent after hours and on the weekend. Most senders don't expect you to respond as soon as you receive the message. Many simply were getting the issue off of their proverbial desk and onto yours. By responding to emails only during the workday and avoiding those that arrive after hours and on weekends, you can "train" your frequent correspondents as to when you actually will be getting back in touch. Thus, their expectations will line accordingly.

Develop Extended Signatures
Most email software today allows you to have a variety of automated closing signatures following your message. The more you can develop, the more time you save. I have more than 40 email closing signatures, including my biography, list of books, speech topics, and so on.

Depending on what position you hold or what business you're in, you can craft a number of email signatures to frequent questions asked. Hence, you've put in some initial work, but saved a lot of time and effort in the long run.

Meaningful and Coherent Subject Lines

Because people are besieged by too many messages today, your subject line becomes more important than ever before. You want to avoid words that spammers frequently use, and keep the subject line as short, relevant, and understandable as possible.

For example, "Yes, let's proceed with the ABC project" is perfectly suitable because it gives the recipient a quick answer, identifies what the topic is about, and alleviates your need to have an extended response in the message area. On the other hand, "re:," "forward:," or cryptic subject lines such as "The issue is not one easily resolved" are not nearly as helpful to recipients.

Some people argue that if you maintain the same subject line back and forth so as to create a trail, it proves to be effective for both parties. But is it? I prefer sending emails each with clear and enhanced subject lines as a situation unfolds.

Stay Focused

It's tempting to want to combine multiple issues within a single email to a correspondent. Single focus email messages, particularly when there's some level of complexity involved, are preferable. Hence, the recipient can focus on one issue at a time as your email messages are received.

We all fall into the trap of believing it's more efficient to combine several topics within a single email message to a single correspondent. I am guilty of it myself. However, for maintaining clarity of issues, for filing purposes, and for long-term productivity, one issue per correspondence trail is preferable.

Avoid Attachments

If you can, avoid attachments, particularly to first time correspondents. When you can, offer the message within the message area. You have a higher probability of it being read. People are leery of attachments, especially ones with large byte counts. Granted, sometimes you can't get away from it, or sometimes it's completely appropriate or even called for. All the rest of the times, avoid attachments.

Proofread, Proofread, Proofread

A fair amount of slack is allowed in the transmission of email messages. Your grammar doesn't have to be the King's English; you can have typos and spelling errors. Still, a proofread message is superior to one that is not. Once again, especially in the case of sending information to the first time correspondents, the odds of your effective interaction increase if you've taken the time to convey exactly the message you intend.

Your Message is Not Private

Vast privacy abuses of the Obama administration confirm that nothing you send over the Internet and via email is private. The FBI, the National Security Administration, and a host of other government agencies, as well as private corporations and internet providers themselves, can tap into your private correspondence with tremendous ease.

Facebook is not your friend. Google has collected more information on you than you have ever imagined. Yes, I know you've already sent hundreds, if not thousands, of messages that would be embarrassing if they appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, and it's too late to do anything about it. Going forward, however, knowing what you know now, exercise caution in what you send – everything that you do on the Internet can be captured and preserved for all eternity.

A Reply by (Date) Folder

For key correspondents, and particularly when I'm waiting to hear about a particular issue, I find it best to park such email messages in a reply by (date) folder. I can look into this folder and quickly surmise who has been giving me the answers I've been seeking in a timely manner and who has not.

Such a folder also affords me the opportunity to send my correspondents a reminder that I am awaiting their reply. Each of us has to recognize that today, our correspondents, as well as ourselves, are so overwhelmed by the volume of messages we send and receive, that not getting a timely reply doesn't denote disrespect, inefficiency, or lack of caring. Sometimes people are overwhelmed and haven't gotten to your important message within a timeframe you would have preferred. A gentle reminder can work wonders.

Handle the Chippies Immediately

When you receive an email message that only requires a quick response such as yes or no, or proceed or don't proceed, go ahead and fire it off. This may seem like common sense, but I've encountered many career professionals who allow the chippies to mount up. Then, even though each one would only take a minute or less to address, the accumulated burden of tackling them all begins to loom large.

Don't allow the buildup, and you forego the issue all together. Most of the time the answer that you would provide immediately is the same answer you would provide after having the message linger for hours or days on end.

Unsubscribe with Vigor

In our quest to stay on top of it all, each of us, too often, subscribes to information services that looked enticing at the time. Then, low and behold, we find ourselves oversubscribed. We receive constant reminders that a new issue from this magazine or a new report from this vendor is available, and all we have to do is click here. Or, we receive HTML emails with large byte counts that clog up our inbox and truly, we have no intention of reading the message.

So, with resolve, unsubscribe to as many items as you can and then magically, you'll find that you don't miss most of them, if not all of them. You can always re-subscribe later – no need to feel guilty that you've decided to be taken off of the roster. A vendor or purveyor of information should understand and do this graciously. If they don't have an automatic routine for unsubscribing, then simply send an email that indicates your preference.

Tackling Email in Waves

I've spoken with top achievers about the issue of unrelenting messages. Many have told me that they gravitated to an otherwise unarticulated system of handling emails "in waves." In other words, when they do check email, they attempt to handle four, six, or eight at a time, as opposed to all of the emails that have arrived.

If you're working on a project, and say, you prefer to proceed for 20 minute stretches, and then check email, handling email in waves works well. At the end of 20 minutes, for example, a variety of new messages have added to messages that you haven't replied to yet, and you may be facing 15 to 18 total messages.

Pick any four or six that you can handle, then and there. You'll feel good about your accomplishment and be able to return to the task at hand for perhaps another 20 minute stretch. Sometimes, you can handle more than eight, but other times, you might not be able to handle any.

Predetermine When You'll Check Email

The last recommendation is perhaps the best of all. If you can predetermine when you'll check email, your productivity will shoot up.

Most people today, myself included, are lax when it comes to checking email. In fact, we check as often as we can, anytime there's a spare moment, anytime we're flustered on another task, and anytime we simply feel the urge. Checking email provides a form of instant gratification.

From a pure productivity standpoint, however, nothing compares to working for uninterrupted stretches throughout the day, week, year, and your career. Work to relegate email back to its proper place, which is a tool that serves you, not the default management system that rules your career and your life.

So, if you want to establish a routine where you check email once in the morning, once before lunch, once after lunch, once in midafternoon, and once at the end of the day, by all means, proceed! Those five check-in periods will work as well as anything. You'll be able to stay on top of your email correspondence in a prudent manner, be able to respond in a reasonably timely manner, and otherwise remain highly productive throughout the day on tasks and projects that require your utmost attention.

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