Make Email Better

Idea In Short

Email should move work toward a decision, clarity or closure. Before sending, ask what you are trying to say, who needs to act and whether email is even the right channel. Edit mercilessly and address people by name.

People Use Email Poorly

People write long-winded email essays that are ambiguous and often copy too many people. These sloppy senders create more confusion, frustration and rework. In this case, more communication is actually worse. Email should help everyone efficiently get the work done and stop emailing. Any email that just perpetuates more email is a problem.

Take 15 Seconds Before You Send

Before sending, pause and ask what you are trying to say, whether you are sending it to the correct audience and what your expectations are. Ask whether you can say it more succinctly and whether this email is even needed. There are a frightening number of books on email, which seems like an inane topic. Apply common sense, think like an executive and strive for the greater productivity of everyone, not just yourself. 1

Add Value and Move the Conversation

If you are just forwarding emails and saying "for your information" or "see below," you are a consulting mailman. At a minimum, provide context and the action needed. The bigger question is what value you are really adding in this role. Add value on the email and move the conversation toward a decision, clarity or the end of the trail. The goal of your email should be to help everyone efficiently get the work done and stop emailing.

Write Directly and Clearly

Write directly and clearly, using bullet points and writing as if to a junior high schooler. Use the phrase "no action required" for everyone who does not need to act. Make the title clear, because all survey creators know the email title is the most valuable real estate. Address the email to specific people: Tom handles one item, Billy another, Joan needs no action. Ask specifically for what is needed, such as reviewing a spreadsheet and giving feedback by 5 p.m. 2

Manage the Thread and the Reply All

Know grammar and usage. Read Strunk and White's Elements of Style. For example, use "e.g." to mean "for example" and "i.e." to mean "that is to say." When possible, move the conversation forward by delegating tasks to the right person or telling people what you plan to do if no one disagrees. Be careful with reply all, and pretend it costs you $20 every time you use it. If a thread is spinning, take time to super-summarize the situation like meeting minutes with background, situation and decisions needed. This becomes a stake in the ground that prevents more pinging back and forth.

Build Relationships and Document Decisions

Develop relationships with the people you work with so you can pick up the phone and make decisions without email. Become a decision-driven organization. Use email as documentation of decisions made, because it is a good reference for the future. Have a friend proofread your emails for clarity before sending to many people. When sending documents, explain what is in the file and the specific things you want reviewed or done. Do not just send an email with the file, because that is disrespectful.

Be Proactive and Stay Disciplined

If you are using email to show that you are busy or productive, it is sad. As the Marines say, do not go admin. Be proactive by following up on cold-case discussions and letting people know how things turned out. Close the loop and people will love you. Do not be an idiot: assume any of your emails can be discoverable in a lawsuit and read by an attorney, and the same goes for your social media. Edit mercilessly, cut out the fat and be a judge of your own work by asking the who, what and why questions. 3

Questions to Ask Before Emailing

Ask why you are sending this email and what the purpose is, whether it is providing information, getting feedback, asking for a decision or just covering yourself. Depending on the purpose, you may draft the words and structure differently. Ask why use email at all, and whether this is better handled by a phone call or an instant message. Think like a marketing communications planner who allocates budget across print, radio, television and internet channels, because each method has its benefits and costs. Ask who you are sending this to and whether you can leave other people off. Ask who needs to respond and whether it is acceptable for most people to simply be aware. If so, let them know it is not urgent or that no action is required. Put the critically important message in the title and use bullet points. Ask what result you want and what the next steps are. Consider whether this is leading to a physical meeting and whether there are logistics to cover. Finally, ask when you are sending the mail and how distracting your email habit is to your productivity, because poor email habits and multitasking quietly destroy focus.

Treat the Inbox Like a Cost Center

Every email you send creates a small tax on every recipient's attention, so the discipline is to minimize that tax. Before adding someone to the chain, ask whether their participation changes the outcome. Before hitting send, ask whether a shorter message would carry the same decision. Treat the subject line as a headline that lets busy readers triage in seconds. When you close a thread, state the decision and the owner so the conversation actually ends. Executives who run tight inboxes model the behavior they want from their teams, and the culture shifts toward fewer, higher-quality messages. The goal is not zero email but email that moves work forward and then stops.

Match the Channel to the Message

Channel choice is a skill most professionals never consciously practice. Email suits documentation, async updates and requests with a clear deadline. Instant message suits quick clarifications that should not live forever. A call or meeting suits nuance, conflict and decisions that need real-time agreement. Mismatched channels create the friction that drains productivity, such as debating a complex trade-off over a thread that spirals for days. Matching the message to the medium is a habit that compounds, because the right channel resolves in minutes what the wrong one never finishes.

- 1The Average Professional Spends About 28 Percent Of The Workday On Email, So

Even Modest Efficiency Gains Reclaim Significant Time

- 2Strunk And White's Elements Of Style Counsels Omitting Needless Words, Making Definite Assertions And Keeping Sentences Concise, Which Applies Directly To Email
- 3Some Companies Ban Internal Email To Reclaim Focus, Because Constant Inbox Checking Fragments Attention And Reduces Deep Work

Summary

Better email is mostly discipline. Pause 15 seconds before sending, write to be understood, address people specifically and edit out the fat. Treat every message as discoverable, close the loop and never use email to look busy. Move the conversation forward.