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Tips for taming the email beast: Part 1

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Table of contents for Tips for taming the email beast

1. Tips for taming the email beast: Part 1



Despite ever-sophisticated email software with dazzling benefits, features and spam filters, career professionals everywhere are finding it more and more difficult to tame the daily email beast.

Vital messages you receive in the course of the day or a week, merit your time. But when your time and efforts are driven by email, the types of things you'll be able to complete will 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. Email and instant messaging can replace face-to-face communication, special deliveries and occasional meetings, but those functions, as convenient and critical as they might be, do not represent a substitute for taking control of your activities, time and day.

This week and next we'll look at some guidelines I've collected over the years.

1. No complaints by email

If you have a grievance, it's best to phone it in or handle it face-to-face. There are subtleties in your voice that can't be conveyed by email. Also, you don't know when and where somebody might retrieve your message, and depending on the level of your dissatisfaction, might take things totally out of context.

The same holds true if you get a complaint from an email correspondent. A quick phone call can go a long way in resolving the issue. If you respond by email, you might resolve the issue then and there, or you might incur a trail of email messages that, after considerable effort, finally equal the same solution that you'd have found with a few minutes on the phone.

2. Email only during the workday



Many people resolutely believe they need to be “on” all day long, meaning they answer emails that come in after hours and on weekends. By responding to emails only during the workday and avoiding those that arrive after hours and on weekends, you can “train” your frequent correspondents so they’ll know when you’ll be getting back in touch. Their expectations will line up accordingly.

3. Develop extended signatures

Most email software today lets you have a variety of automated closing signatures following your message. The more you can develop, the more time you save. Depending on what position you hold, you can craft a number of email signatures to frequently questions asked. You’ll have to put in some initial work, but it will save a lot of time and effort in the long run.

4. Use meaningful, coherent subject lines

People are besieged by too many messages today, so your subject line is more important than ever. 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.

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. Is it? I prefer sending emails each with clear and enhanced subject lines as a situation unfolds.



5. Stay focused

It’s tempting to want to combine multiple issues within a single email but single-focus email messages, particularly when there’s some complexity involved, are preferable. 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. It’s not.

6. Avoid attachments

If you can, don’t use 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 those with large byte counts. Only use an attachment when you absolutely must and the situation calls for it.

7. Proofread, proofread, proofread

A fair amount of slack is allowed in email messages. Your grammar doesn’t have to be flawless; you can have typos and spelling errors. Still, a proofread message is superior to one that’s not. Especially when sending information to first-time correspondents, the odds of your effective interaction increase if you’ve taken time to convey the exact message you intended.

Next week: Six more tips on taming the email beast.