

We really must look at EMAIL

by
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I took some undergraduate courses in Business Administration many years ago – in the Dark Ages, before email, when office memos ruled the world. To hone our skills in memo writing, one of my professors insisted that all assignments were to be submitted using a strict memo format. In her business, she explained, the memo format was not about spacing and commas, it was all about the discipline of crafting effective business communication that was worthy of the recipients' time and effort. The time has come to rethink our approach about email. Let me explain by providing an example, in the format that I learned.

To: BCPVPA Membership

From: Read.jorgensen@gmail.com

Re: Making email communication more effective

Purpose:

The following email provides specific recommendations to standardize communication through email, saving time and effort by using a prescribed format to promote clear, direct communication.

Action:

Begin all emails with specific Purpose, Action, and Background sections. Set a date to begin using this format, say the Monday after you read this article.

1. All emails will have three parts: Purpose, Action, and Background.
2. The Purpose clearly states the reason for the email and the intended result.
3. The Action clearly states what action is expected from the reader.
4. The Background is the contextual information needed to support the Purpose and Action.

Background:

Email is overwhelmingly the tool of choice for business communication; however, many emails are written quickly with little attention to the Purpose and Action.

I am sure you will agree that we are receiving more and more communication via email with less operational value in each message. "A poor carpenter always blames their tools", and we are no exception. We naturally blame the email system for our mounting frustration, but the real problem is that many emails lack clear, well-defined messaging with direct operational value.

Emails have a low effort-threshold in comparison to letters, phone calls, and meetings, which require more preparation and critical thought. With email, small tidbits of information can be rapidly fired to employees with little effort on the part of the sender and hidden in each one is the assumption that the receiver can easily understand the importance, context, and action required for each message. All too often the receiver spends more time deciphering than the sender spent composing. And, in our effort to be transparent with employees, we compound the problem by spitting out chunks of information that have lost context by degrees over multiple emails. The messages, often sent using the misused 'Forward' function, are delivered to hapless recipients who can only guess why they are receiving your email.

We need to recognise that email is easy on the sender, and hard on the receiver.

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Facing dozens – or hundreds – of emails each week, all from well-meaning senders, the sheer effort of curating email now masquerades as real work. "I have to do my email," we cry, rather than spending time on productive or creative tasks. Productivity in your job suffers as your work is fragmented into small micro-actions; as your inbox fills, your day becomes more about shuffling or redirecting other people's priorities and less about focusing on the important tasks that make a difference in your school. Even the time spent just organising your inbox is a heavy cost. If an employee spends 15 minutes a day (a ridiculously low estimate) simply sorting and deleting email, a district with 1,000 employees will collectively spend 250 hours **each day** on electronic housekeeping with zero operational benefit.

It is open season on email as everyone in your district has access to every Inbox, and with each email, a sender is unwittingly appropriating time from the workday of another employee. As a single cog in the machine, you may feel that you are not part of the problem with the few emails you send each day. What is the problem is that every other person, with their cursor poised over the Send button, feels the same way. It's a Tragedy of the Commons¹, that occurs when many users have unrestricted access to a free and open resource. Without a coordinated approach, each user acts in their own self-interest with no regard

to the accumulative effect on the common resource. While a few emails are not a huge drain on employee time, the accumulative effect of thousands of emails on the collective productivity of the organization.

I know what you are saying: "I am too busy, and I don't have time to compose email this way". Look at it the other way. Every recipient you send to is busy as well, but you expect them to stop what they are doing, sort out your most recent message, and decide what to do about it.

What is needed is a fundamental realignment of how, and why, we communicate throughout our organizations. Unfortunately, our casual approach to email is well ingrained and change will take some effort. By using a standard email format supporting clear and direct communication, employees will start to feel that their Inbox is about operational importance rather than organisation annoyance. But, more importantly, as everyone takes time to compose well-formatted, impactful messages, the result will be fewer messages with better communication through email.

If you are looking for an excellent book on email for you or your book club, I would recommend, *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload* by Cal Newport. It is an easy, informative read that will help you understand the blizzard of email we find ourselves in each day.

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons



Are you encouraged to make your email communications more effective?

Tell us how you took up the challenge, and the differences that you have seen.

 @bcpvpa @mrjvictoria