

Email communication at work

A guide for individuals



Email is part of most people's lives. Since its creation in the 1970s, its growth has been unprecedented, facilitating quick and easy communication between individuals across borders and time zones, for both business and personal use. But despite its widespread usage and popularity as a communication tool, for some individuals and employers, it can be a source of major frustration, anxiety and lost productivity.

In order to understand more about how email both facilitates and negatively impacts the employee experience, we conducted a study into email usage at work amongst UK employees. From this research, we have identified a number of **tangible actions you can take to help improve your experience of email**.

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You've got mail!, at
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Our recommendations are divided into two areas – behaviour changes (i.e. what you can do differently) and mindset changes (i.e. how you think about email). Research has indicated the role of email behaviours in our experience of pressure and stress, but we also know how important our own expectations and mental 'rules of thumb' are, in how we respond to the outside world.

But remember, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for email, so you should reflect on what works best for you, given your role and experience of work to date.

Behaviour

- Our results indicate that leaving your email on all day could increase your perceptions of email pressure. **You may want to consider opening your email application when you want to use email and closing it down for periods** when you don't wish to be interrupted by incoming emails. In other words, use email when you intend to, not just because it's always running in the background.
- Unless it's a requirement of your role, **consider how much push email is helping you**. If you find yourself distracted and/or pressured by the constant notification of newly arriving emails, consider updating your device to only download emails when you instruct it. This can provide you with a sense of control over the flow of emails and allow you to concentrate on other tasks.



- Previous research has recommended limiting or completely **switching off email notifications on your devices**. Consider how useful you personally find them and whether it might be less of a distraction to turn them off. This can allow you to focus on other tasks, while your email application is running in the background, therefore still limiting the potential for email interruptions.
- Our results also indicate the strong relationships between email checking times (early morning and late at night) and perceptions of email pressure. It would be inappropriate of us to instruct people to stop checking their email at a time that suits them, but **consider how useful you feel it is to begin your working day so early or end it so late. It's also worth considering the potential impact your very early or late** emails have on your colleagues.

Are you checking email outside of working hours to keep on top of things? Does this contribute to your feelings of relaxation and switching off from work? Or are you checking it outside of work due to perceptions of pressure or even fear? If it's the former, and this doesn't cause undue concern or pressure, then go for it! If it's the latter, consider how you might reduce your checking of email over time. If you can reduce out of hours email use without it impacting your productivity or incurring negative feedback from your colleagues or clients, perhaps you were worrying unnecessarily.

- While there was only a weak relationship between volume of email received and perceptions of email pressure, it may be useful to **consider how many emails you yourself are sending**. Think about the colleagues and clients whom you email, their communication preferences and the messages you are trying to convey. Is email always the best medium? Might a telephone call or video conference call be better suited to the task at hand?
- The content of email has also been identified as a potential stressor at work. **Reflect on your email writing style** and check your messages for ambiguity, the potential for misinterpretation and how these messages might contribute to conflict or disharmony at work. Remember, not everyone finds it easy to communicate clearly using email.

Mindset

- If you think email is a source of stress for you at work, it can be useful to explore how you think about it. **Reflect on your emotional responses** to emails from various sources and see if there are any trends or patterns. Are they from certain people? Are your 'stressful' emails about certain topics? Or at certain times of day (or night!).



We are more likely to misinterpret messages or read more into them than is intended when we let our emotions take over, often resulting in an angry response that we later regret. But remember that you are not your emotions, and you don't have to act on them – take a step back from the email before responding and compose your reply when you're feeling calmer and more in control.

- **Challenge your own thinking.** Consider how much of your thinking is factual and how much is driven by your emotions, expectations or assumptions, about what you think 'will' or 'might' happen. We can sometimes predict future 'disasters' that will never happen and easily imagine terrible consequences for our (in)action that have no basis in reality. Be careful that you don't find yourself fortune-telling or mind-reading (e.g. 'I have to send this report by 5pm, otherwise we'll lose this client account' or 'My manager will think I can't do my job if I don't respond to this email now').
- Listen to your 'self-talk' when it comes to email. We all have an inner voice, which can be helpful and supportive (like a sports coach or a teacher) or unhelpful (like an inner critic). **Listen to your self-talk when it comes to email and watch out for phrases that have a sense of 'demandingness'** (e.g. 'I have to check my email', 'I must respond to this immediately' or 'I need to empty my inbox'), and check if your appraisal of the situation is correct or realistic. You might be demanding too much of yourself and inflicting additional, unwanted pressure. Consider how helpful this kind of self-talk is and whether you could moderate it to something more forgiving (e.g. 'I'd like to check my email now, but...').
- **Consider how you can reflect on your experience of email over time.** We're not very good at remembering all the details of our daily lives, so you may find it useful to maintain a simple journal or diary, noting your key observations about emails (e.g. your sense of satisfaction when you've emptied your inbox, your feelings of frustration when receiving emails late at night, your motivation for checking your email first thing in the morning and so on). Reviewing this record of your habits over time may reveal some trends or patterns to you.



Get in touch

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