

Email Communication: When Is It Productive & When Is It Not?

In today's business world, people often lose site of the many communication options they have available to them. Email and texting have become the default communication method - it's been estimated that the average person spends over 30% of their day sending, reading, or processing email.

Email is often the right tool to use and can be tremendous productivity booster. It is an excellent means to communicate non-urgent items, requests that do not require immediate feedback, or information that needs to be distributed to a large group of people. Also, a great benefit of email is that it allows the person receiving the messages to process them on their own time schedule. They can process email after they've addressed more important items, which is good for productivity.

But using email can sometimes hurt the productivity of both the sender and the recipients in ways that are not obvious at the time the email is sent. For example, if you think there's a chance that the person reading your email may not interpret it correctly, talk to them directly. It's so much easier to see how they react and clarify your intentions through conversation. A misinterpreted email can cause a negative reaction or an inappropriate response for days until noticed. Or, if you know that you are going to see someone later in the day and have a question for him or her, don't send an email - just ask the person when you meet. The quick conversation will almost always take less time than the email exchange - especially if there's any misinterpretation like mentioned above. Keep yourself from getting into the habit of immediately emailing when you have a request - think about what's the most efficient way to obtain the information you need.

Also, avoid using email for issues such as conflict resolution, reprimands, or other types of communication that may trigger an emotional reaction. And email is generally not the best tool for brainstorming. While you may get a lot of responses, the delayed interaction aspect of email doesn't typically facilitate the synthesizing of ideas that brainstorming is intended to create. Negotiations are another item to generally avoid on email. Once someone has stated their position in writing, it's so much harder to get them to change. Plus, reading the immediate reaction of the other person is often critical in negotiations, something that can't be done via email.

Below are some general questions to ask before composing an email:

Is email the most productive for everyone? Think about what is most efficient and effective for all parties involved, even if it means slightly more work for you. A voicemail, phone call, or a live conversation may be a better way to communicate. One inefficient, misunderstood, or unclear email from you can create a lot of work for others –

especially if a large distribution list is used. If there's a reasonable chance that others may not interpret your email correctly, use another communication method with more dimension such as a phone call, a direct meeting, or a voice mail.

Are you emailing just because it is easy or convenient? Avoid the urge to send an email on an issue that should be handled with discussion or other means just because email is most convenient at the time. For example, don't send an email just because you are in a meeting and that is the only way you can communicate or because you want to "clear out your Inbox or task list". While email may seem convenient for you at the time, an ineffective email can often slow down the overall process and may actually make more overall work for you and the others involved. It can also be distracting and counterproductive to the meeting you are in since your attention is focused elsewhere. If it is a critical item and you can't leave the meeting, email may be your only option. But in many cases, you (and the others you are communicating with) are better off if you wait and handle the issue in the most effective way.

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