

Ian Price's Email Top Tips

NOTE: The following tips are components of a broad strategy to eliminate a culture of email overload within an organisation and therefore increase efficiency, reduce stress and make work a more pleasant place to be. These tips are intended for use as part of a broader programme which includes other elements such as internal research and working sessions.

The first six tips can be used to form a code which the organisation's leadership needs to drive and support. If implemented, it will restore email to its proper use as a conduit for non-urgent information. Everybody needs to agree to support this code if it is to work. There are five additional tips that will help the individual manage email more effectively.

SIX COMPONENTS OF AN ORGANISATIONAL EMAIL CODE

1) We will not use email as our first resort for internal communication

As a point of principle, speak to a colleague face-to-face if possible and, failing that, by phone.

2) We will not email out of hours

This creates more email as people feel the need to show that they are looking at their emails and a "virtual presenteeism" ensues. Urgent communication should be by phone.

3) We will not use email for negative feedback or "flaming"

Email is a disastrous medium for conflict as people feel the need to "set the record straight" and reply. Sort it via face-to-face discussion

4) We will not use email for complex debates

For anything complicated, email is a poor medium as people are required to read threads of discussion. Take it off-line and sort it via meeting or conference call

5) We will not "red-flag" email as urgent

It should be agreed that there is no such thing as an urgent email – the "red flag" should never be used. If it is really urgent, reach the person face-to-face or call them

6) Only copy people that really need to see it and don't reply-to-all

Copying large numbers of people causes email chains to escalate, particularly when reply-to-all is used

Once the organisation is pulling together on the code, the following tips will help the individual keep on top of the inbox:

FIVE EMAIL TOP TIPS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

1) Tackle email in focused bouts

Put aside a period of time each day, ideally first thing in the morning, to tackle email rather than allowing to bleed into the whole day's work

2) Be ruthless with deletion and filing

If in doubt, delete. If it does not require action, file it in a folder. Only leave messages requiring action in your inbox.

3) Make sure you can see the bottom of your inbox

This means having no more than about thirty messages in your inbox once you've cleared messages out. Liberating when achieved even if it takes discipline to sustain

4) Turn off all indicators of new mail

Lose the flashing indicators and noises and focus on whatever else you are doing. This way, you don't keep breaking off to see each new message. If it's urgent, they'll call you.

5) Exit email completely when focusing on other work

If you are trying to get a focused piece of work done, don't be tempted to deal with emails as they come in. Exit Outlook altogether – after all, if it's urgent, they can call

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