

CONNECTING EFFECTIVELY

STRATEGIC ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICIES

It's dinner time. Just as your partner asks you for your help brainstorming solutions to a problem he's having with his elderly parents, you hear the unmistakable "pop" of a Slack notification. Without thinking, you reach for your phone--and see both irritation and resignation in your partner's eyes.

Inappropriate strategies for handling electronic communications siphon off valuable time and attention--at work and at home. Fortunately, over the past few years researchers have learned a great deal about how management can effectively structure expectations about electronic communications--and how employees can effectively respond to these expectations.



During Working Hours

“Email is killing our productivity....The average person checks their email 11 times an hour, processes 122 messages a day, and spends 28% of their total workweek on email.”¹

What research reveals about work time spent on email is startling--and it doesn't even take into account the time spent on other electronic communications, like Slack, Teams, and HipChat. Jocelyn K. Gleib, the author of *Unsubscribe: How to Kill Email Anxiety, Avoid Distractions, and Get Real*, points out the addictive nature of electronic communications. Not only are we hardwired to want to reflexively check in, but we also feel compelled to respond--even when a response isn't really required.² And once we've finished checking and responding, chat and email are still impacting our productivity: every time we switch from one task to another, there is an “attention cost” to be paid. The brain needs time to shift gears from

the first task to the second--to let go of the previous task and its demands and recall the objectives and procedures of the new task. Frequent task switching--responding to electronic communications every few minutes while trying to complete a work assignment, for instance--can lead to brief mental blocks and errors, and "even brief mental blocks created by shifting between tasks can cost as much as 40 percent of someone's productive time."³

Recommendations for Management

- Create clear and reasonable policies about expected response times for both urgent and non-urgent communications.
- Create clear policies regarding the use of "reply-all," "cc," and "forward"; discourage their use unless absolutely necessary.
- Ask that employees respond only to emails that require a response; encourage the use of "canned" responses and "smart replies," if they are available on your email/messaging platform.

Recommendations for Employees

- Check email and messages only at predetermined times throughout your day; mute notifications if you are able to.
- Check email and messages only as often as required to keep up with your organization's expected response times.
- Pare down the length and number of your electronic communications: Is the communication necessary? Who really needs to be included? What is the core message?

Afterhours

Increasingly, employees are expected to stay in touch with work even after the work day ends. The more afterhours connectivity expected of an employee, though, the more likely the employee is to suffer negative consequences. A recent University of Virginia study demonstrated that "People who felt simply the expectation of having to answer work emails during non-work hours were more anxious, and reported more relationship stress and poorer health.⁴ Since stressed employees are more likely to use sick days and to consider other employment, companies need to weigh the financial impact of their afterhours communications expectations. It might be tempting to simply ban electronic communications

outside of office hours, as many European companies do--but this, too, has potential pitfalls. For some workers, the inability to use off hours to tackle the emails and messages constantly accumulating in their inboxes may itself be stressful, and such policies don't take into account the differing needs employees have according to their personalities and their work responsibilities. Dr. Emma Russell, a psychologist and senior lecturer in management at the University of Sussex Business School who has studied this need for flexibility, notes that "The take-away for the public from our research is that 'one size fits all' solutions for dealing with work email are unlikely to work."⁵

Recommendations for Management

- Explicitly state expectations for afterhours communication in position descriptions; limit expectations to what is actually necessary for conducting business.
- Periodically survey employees to assess whether company policies on electronic communications are being followed and whether policies need updating.

Recommendations for Employees

- Limit afterhours communication: choose the fewest "check-in" times compatible with company expectations and respond only to urgent messages.
- Schedule fixed times for check-ins, if possible, to minimize the disruption to your personal life.

1. Jocelyn K. Gleij, qtd in Alyse Kalish, "The Scientific Reasons Why Email Makes You Feel So Anxious," The Muse, retrieved 8 September 2020 from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-scientific-reasons-why-email-makes-you-feel-so-anxious>
2. Alyse Kalish, "The Scientific Reasons Why Email Makes You Feel So Anxious," The Muse, retrieved 8 September 2020 from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-scientific-reasons-why-email-makes-you-feel-so-anxious>
3. "Multi-tasking: Switching Costs," American Psychological Association, 20 March 2006, retrieved 10 September 2020 from <https://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask>
4. Alice G. Walton, "The Pressure Of Answering Work Emails At Night Takes Toll On Mental Health, Study Finds," Forbes, 10 August 2018, retrieved 8 September 2020 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2018/08/10/the-pressure-of-answering-work-emails-at-night-takes-toll-on-mental-health-study-finds/#689943994f91>
5. Neil Vowles, "Banning out-of-hours email likely to be harmful to some employees, new study finds," The University of Sussex, 17 January 2020, retrieved 8 September 2020 from <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/50487>