



Article from
Stepping Stone
March 2020



Email Strategies and Tactics: Less is More

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Knowledge workers—those whose jobs involve handling or using information—spend a significant amount of time on electronic communication. According to a 2012 McKenzie study quoted in *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, the average knowledge worker spends more than 60 percent of the workweek engaged in electronic communication and internet searching. Almost 30 percent of their time is spent reading and answering email.¹ Given that workers spend this much time communicating electronically, writing effectively is critical to their success.

Here are strategies and tactics to make electronic and email communication as effective as possible:

1. **Question whether writing is the best vehicle for the message.** For difficult conversations, address the recipient in person, by phone, or by video. This helps to avoid miscommunication. An email, or any other form of written communication that does not allow for interaction or a deeper conversation, should serve as a last resort.
2. **Make “Save as Draft” a habit.** Because written communication can easily be misinterpreted, it helps to hit “Save as Draft,” instead of “Send,” when you complete your email. This is especially true during an emotional situation. Come back a little later and reread what you wrote, then edit as needed. I use this strategy and find that I rarely send the original email after rethinking my communication.
3. **Limit the distribution.** Typically, the more emails I send, the more I receive. This is especially true when many people are copied. Michael Mankins and Eric Garton, the authors of *Time, Talent, Energy*, recommend never using the “Reply All” button.² They argue that when senders type in each recipient’s name, they are much more careful about whom to include in the distribution.
4. **Use a “less is more” approach.** Use bold, italics and underlining effectively, but only when needed. Make the “asks” stand out by using colors, bold font or highlighting. Use this approach sparingly and in the most important part of the email. I try to abide by the “scroll-down rule,” which is that if the recipient needs to scroll down a page, he or she is less likely to read the email right away. Fitting everything onto one page increases the likelihood of the recipient reading, and responding, faster. Try not to cover multiple subjects in a single note, which may make it too long and difficult to follow.
5. **Think about the purpose.** Is the communication informational, meant to solicit a response or instructional? If it is just informational, tag the subject line as “informational only” so people know no response is needed. If a response is needed, make sure the requested action is clear. Include this information in the subject line, such as “response requested by” and give the date. Make sure that when sending an email, it’s not up to the recipient to figure out what should happen next. As a recipient, I find it’s always helpful when



people propose a clear action item or next step for me to agree or disagree.

In a summary of his experiments on electricity, Benjamin Franklin wrote, “I have already made this paper too long ... not having now time to make it shorter.” He was right—it takes time to reduce content and state conclusions concisely. Using the tips above will improve readability, encourage the right follow-ups and reduce confusion.

When it comes to maximizing the time spent on written communications, and making them as effective as possible, remember to keep in mind the mantra: Less is More. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Newport, Cal. 2016. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- 2 Garton, Eric, and Michael Mankins. 2017. *Time, Talent, Energy: Overcome Organizational Drag and Unleash Your Team's Productive Power*. Boston: Bain and Company.