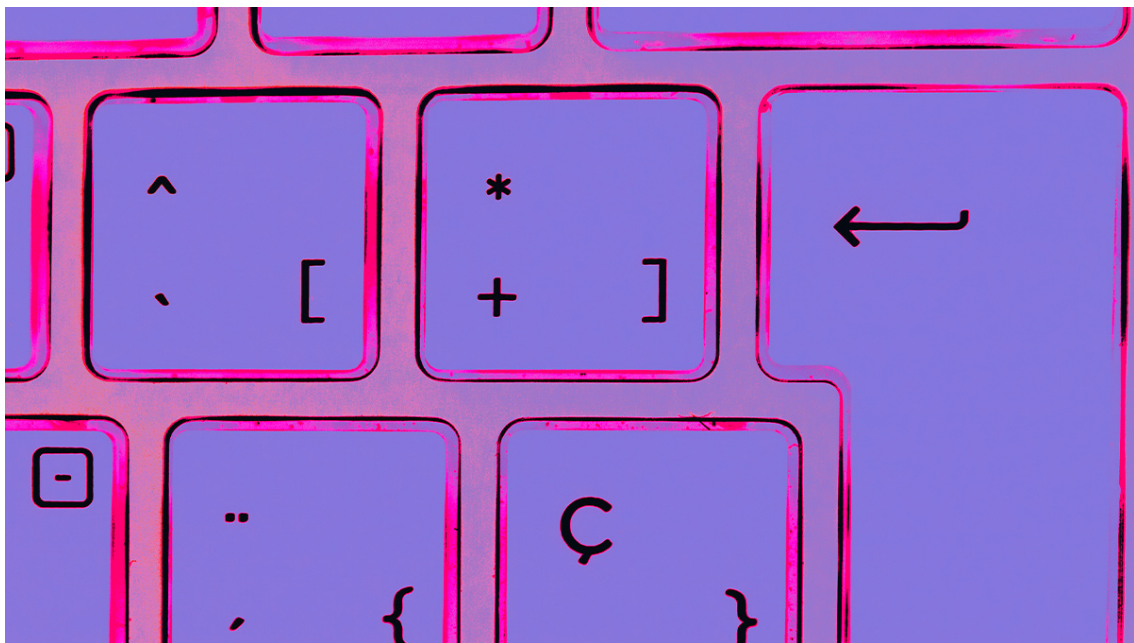


Stop. Does That Message Really Need to Be an Email?

by Colin D Ellis

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Summary. As a business tool, email is both essential and incredibly annoying. While we can't do without it, many of us aren't using it in the right way, and even more of us are sending way more emails than we should, leading to unnecessary distractions that cost us around 27... [more](#)

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Have you ever waited the entire day to get an email response from your manager? Then, just as you are about to break down and send a follow up message, you run into her in the hall — or these days, on Zoom — and she says, “I’m sorry. I get too many emails. Slack is the best way to get an immediate response from me.”

As a business tool, email is both essential and incredibly annoying. While we can’t do without it, many of us aren’t using it in the right way, and even more of us are sending way more emails than we should be. On average, we check our inboxes 15 times a day, leading to unnecessary distractions and around 27 wasted minutes.

The irony here is that email isn’t the best way to communicate about ... well, most things. Every time we send an email, we assume that the recipient will interpret our words, our tone, and our intentions correctly. We forget that people read information differently, and often, end up causing more unnecessary breakdowns and confusion than alignments, when in reality, there are plenty of other ways we could be connecting.

For instance: If we’re trying to make a convincing argument, video or in-person meetings are the best way to go. Instant messengers like Slack or Hipchat are most intuitive for quick check-ins. And when it comes to clarifying conversations, it’s usually easiest to hop on a call.

Simply put, emails don’t serve all purposes, and if used incorrectly, they slow us down.

So, why has email become our default?

In my 30 years of experience both as an employee and as a business consultant, I’ve observed that email is the go-to means of communication at most companies. Why?

Here's my theory: At some point, between the invention of the internet, the rise of popular service providers in the '90s (AOL, Microsoft Outlook, Delphi) and the release of Tom and Meg's romantic comedy classic *You've Got Mail*, organizations started using email to share information. It became a standard, and we've never looked back.

Despite the availability of newer, more savvy technologies, we seem to have gotten stuck a cycle of imitation: If my peers are sending lots of emails, then I'll do it too. It makes sense. Copying is a natural human behavior, and as each new generation shuffles into the workplace, there is an unspoken pressure to follow the "best practices" established by their seniors. In an HBR article, author Eric Bonabeau discusses why:

1. Safety: We follow what everyone else does so as not to stand out. (You don't want to be the only person doing something else.)
2. Conformity: Safety isn't enough. We want to be accepted, too, so we adopt practices that are like those around us, especially in relation to the culture.

We've all seen it. The boss sends an email to 10 people and copies another 20 people. Those people reply all, rather than think about the people that actually need to see their response. Similarly, if you're new to a team and you see your teammates using email to send simple information that could be sent over Slack message (*I wasn't sure if we were going with theater-style seating for the event. Can someone confirm?*), you'll probably follow suit because you want to be "consistent" with what looks like best practice.

What should email really be used for?

When it comes to communication many approaches are required to ensure that different people, with different interests understand a message clearly and know what action — if any — needs to be taken in response.

So when is email most effective and how should you *really* use it?

Based on my experience, I recommend using email for four things:

- To formally communicate decisions
- To confirm or schedule appointments
- To document important conversations
- To send company-wide announcements that require all staff to receive the same message at the same time

In other words, email is a great way to give someone all the information they need in one place, especially if that information is going to be shared among a group of people. When this approach is taken, it removes the opportunity for confusion and ensures that everyone will receive the same message, just once, without the need for further clarification.

Emails work best when you have a clear, unambiguous message.

For example, don't send an important reminder to someone on Slack where it can easily be missed or overlooked:

“Just a reminder that I need the monthly report by 5 pm today. Let me know if you need any help!”

Use email when you want to clarify what you're expecting and how. In email format, that same Slack message would look like this:

“Could you get me the monthly report by 5 pm on Thursday? Each section should contain no more than one short paragraph (4-5 lines) that clearly articulates the action we are taking in each area. If you require any help, please don't hesitate to give me a call.”

Moving forward, before you decide if your message warrants an email or another mode of communication, ask yourself some questions:

Situation	What to do
Do I need this done in the next 30 minutes?	Pick up the phone
Do I need to share a thought on a task that's already underway?	Slack/IM
Do I need to relay a message I received from senior leadership to multiple people within the team?	Email
Does my response require a ton of explaining?	Pick up the phone
Do I need to bring the team together to set expectations for the week and understand what may get in their way?	Meet face-to-face
Do I need to confirm expectations of my team following a face-to-face discussion?	Email
Do I have a quick (noncritical) question that anyone from the team can answer?	Slack/IM
Will emotions be involved? Does the message relay feelings about an issue or situation that could be misconstrued by others?	Meet face-to-face
Do I need to send my team some "additional information" following a project launch meeting (or something similar)?	Slack/IM
Is this a conversation about performance or behavioral issues?	Meet face-to-face
Am I sharing confidential information, formal documents, or giving approval on a plan?	Email
Am I sharing a document or a link that other members of the team need to collaborate on?	Slack/IM
Am I outlining the steps a team member needs to follow after a performance management situation?	Email
Will this end up in a tedious back-and-forth?	Meet face-to-face

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Now that you know what kind of conversations warrant an email, strive for a few simple tweaks to reset the habit of "email by default," reduce communication noise, and make a positive contribution to your workplace culture.

Colin D Ellis is a culture change expert, and an award-winning author and international speaker. His latest book is '*Culture Hacks: 26 Ideas to Transform the Way You Work.*'