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How to deal with unread emails and what to include in your out-of-office reply

ABC Radio Melbourne By Kristian Silva

Posted Tue at 2:24pm



PHOTO: While email volumes have increased, experts say our skills to manage them haven't evolved. (Pixabay: rawpixel)

It's time to get back to work after a relaxing holiday, but hundreds, if not thousands, of emails await you.

This familiar scenario presented itself to ABC Radio Melbourne presenter Jon Faine, who this week returned from a six-week break to 4,170 unread messages.

In his out-of-office reply, Faine was upfront about his method for dealing with so many messages:

"Jon is away for annual leave until July 15, 2019.

"Emails arriving in the meantime will be deleted without being seen.

"If it is important that I see it, send it again when I return or contact producers through the ABC website."

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Sure, carrying out a bulk delete is a quick way to deal with excessive emails, but is it the best way?

"It would be a rare person who could do that with a clear conscience," said Steuart Snooks, a Melbourne-based email and workplace productivity expert.

He recommended preparing your inbox before going on leave by creating rules to divert messages from distribution lists to folders that you can check later.

People should also create a separate backlog folder and allocate up to two minutes for each message to delete, delegate, deal with immediately or delay a response.

While it may not work for everyone, Mr Snooks suggested keeping your out-of-office reply on for a couple of days after you've returned to work.

"It's a contingency because you know you have to wade through the backlog of emails," he said.



PHOTO: Jon Faine's system for dealing with emails has been described as "a little direct" — not that it bothers him. (Supplied: Brendan McCarthy)

What to put in an out-of-office reply

Zarife Hardy, the director of the Australian School of Etiquette, said out-of-office messages should include a return date and contact details for someone who can assist in your absence.

The language used was key, she said, adding that Faine's approach could be considered "a little direct".

"Most people send an email because they want a response and they're not going to put it on hold and send it later," she said.

"I don't think we can be as sharp as saying, 'I won't be reading them' or 'I won't be responding to them!'."

Dr Amantha Imber, an organisational psychologist and podcast host, said it was important to set "realistic expectations" for the amount of time it would take to reply to people.

"It defeats the purpose of a holiday if you're returning to a mountain of work. It's almost as if you're being punished," she said.

She said she also liked to inject a little personality into her out-of-office replies to "bring a smile to someone's face and teach them something".

The bulk-delete method was not something Dr Imber used but she said she would be open to trying it, provided those contacting her were given sufficient warning.

"I love the idea of saying everything will be deleted," she laughed.



PHOTO: Amantha Imber won't check emails until at least 11:00am, allowing her to focus on projects. (Supplied: Inventium)

Help to avoid drowning in emails

Mr Snooks said the average public sector worker spent more than two hours a day buried in emails.

Instead of "treating an inbox like a storage container", he said people should delete items that were unlikely to be relevant later and assign others to folders or calendar invites.

"Email volumes have changed but the skill sets for dealing with them haven't."

Dr Imber, who previously had a policy of banning emails for one day each month at her business, said she would not check her inbox until 11:00am or noon on work days.

She used the email-free time to focus intently on projects.

"I turn off all notifications and turn off things that cause me to go into reactive mode," she said.

Chat squeezing out personal relationships?

One of the key functions of work-based chat programs like Slack, Microsoft Teams and HipChat is to cut down group discussion emails clogging up inboxes.

While this had achieved some success, it came at the expense of face-to-face interactions, human relations expert Karen Gately said.

Ms Gately said while younger workers were used to this style of communication, some older workers struggled to adapt to another piece of technology.

"I constantly see people misinterpreting or taking things the wrong way because of quick, short, sharp messages," she said.

"There's no shortcut to building trust and respect in your workplace through the way you communicate.

"It all comes down to whether people feel you're trustworthy and they're being respected."

Ditching meetings to boost productivity



Dom Price took a drastic step in his workplace, but the results have been telling.
