

Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects

Stop Email Abuse!

Execs and Interns Alike

Everyone from executives to interns endures the effects of email abuse. In many organizations, email abuse is even worse than meeting abuse. I strongly recommend that project teams establish rules of engagement for project-related email. Here are my seven favorite ground rules.

Ground Rules to Stop Abuse

1. Select a valuable subject line
2. Stick to a single topic
3. Stay “above the fold”
4. Don’t write about private matters
5. Be extra polite
6. Shift long threads to real time
7. Agree on response time

What to Write

The first four ground rules concern the content of an email - *what* you write.

1 Select a valuable subject line. To survive the onslaught of hundreds of emails every day, many people delete emails after scanning only the subject line. Make everyone more efficient by keeping subject lines concise and accurate. You can use certain standard prefixes in subject lines to quickly convey what action is needed before the recipient even opens the message. For example, AR means immediate action required, and FYI means for your information. Also agree

on what circumstances justify marking an email as urgent.

2 Stick to a single topic. If you add more, chances are high that the recipients will only notice the first one, and then you’ll have to send a follow-up email anyway.

3 Stay above the fold. Keep emails short. Program manager and author James T. Brown recommends a one page limit, but I think that nearly all emails should be even shorter than that. Newspaper editors use the term “above the fold” to refer to any story that appears in the top section of a folded newspaper, and thus gets more readership. Similarly, try to make the total content of your message appear above the fold, readable at a glance without scrolling.

4 Don’t write about private matters. You can’t keep email private. The recipient can forward it as he or she pleases. If you have clumsy fingers like me, you can accidentally send it to the wrong person. An executive I knew once accidentally emailed scathing personnel comments to a large email alias, then had to publicly apologize. This did not improve his leadership image!

How to Use Email

My final three ground rules address how project personnel should use email.

5 Be extra polite. Email is naturally a “cold” medium. People take unfounded offense easily, so take extra care in your wording to avoid “flame wars.”

6 Shift long threads to real time. Email is a low bandwidth, low interactivity communication channel. Thus, it is a poor way to resolve long, complicated dialogs. When you see a long series of replies and re-replies on a single topic, get the participants together for a meeting or conference call. If written communication is necessary, summarize the results of that meeting in an email.

7 Agree on response time. Finally, agree on how long project team members will take to respond to an email, even if that response is only to acknowledge receipt and give a date for a fuller reply. For example, I try to respond immediately to emails that are marked urgent and within one business day to others.

Save Time and Reduce Frustration

Good email etiquette makes project team members more efficient. Instead of spending precious time wrestling with email abuse, they can focus on work

that adds real value for the project and its customers. Take some time to help your project teams set up their own email ground rules – the few minutes that you invest will pay back quickly.



With the relentless march of technology, abuse of electronic communications has spread beyond email. Instant messaging and social media have opened up new frontiers for both productivity and abuse. Do you have tips to share on how to use these technological tools effectively on projects? Send me an email with your thoughts.

About the Author

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