

## Keeping up with your inbox – the evolution of the email signoff

### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

- How many emails do you typically receive daily? How do you decide which emails to reply to?
- What kind of emails do you tend to write the most?
- What do you find the most aggravating about emails these days?

### 2 Reading for gist

a. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. With the rise of a plethora of other communication tools, email is no longer essential.
2. Most people suffer from email overwhelm, but some still use it to promote themselves.
3. Better late than never: leave no email unanswered to get ahead professionally.

### 3 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find key words in the article that match them. The section number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then, read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

1. very extreme or serious \_\_\_\_\_ (subtitle)

*The CEO issued a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ warning about AI and the importance of regulation.*

2. not showing taste, quality, style, etc. \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 1)

*The office makeover has been described by some as \_\_\_\_\_, rife with design clichés.*

3. the distance within which it is possible to hear what someone is saying or be heard

\_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 3)

*To say he's thrilled is an understatement. Anyone within \_\_\_\_\_ is aware of his recent promotion.*

4. search for something difficult to find \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 4)

*Use some of the search filters to speed up your search—that way, you don't need to \_\_\_\_\_ through your entire inbox.*

5. encourage someone to do something in a way that is gentle \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 6)

*Some employers \_\_\_\_\_ workers to save more for retirement by matching their contributions.*

6. annoying \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 8)

*A recent survey revealed that having their name misspelt is what most respondents find most \_\_\_\_\_ in work emails.*

7. a collection of weapons and other equipment \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 10)

*In the latest episode of Invest Success, we ask founders to share the most crucial skills in their \_\_\_\_\_.*

8. use something, especially effectively \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 10)

*It is hardly surprising that their results improved after they \_\_\_\_\_ a new DEI strategy.*

9. doing something in a specific situation because there are no other options available

\_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 11)

*The company had to \_\_\_\_\_ pay cuts that impacted almost half of its staff to remain afloat.*

10. existing over a large area \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 12)

*The \_\_\_\_\_ new development includes the construction of hundreds of residential and office spaces.*

11. a situation in which so many questions, ideas or other things are directed at someone that they struggle to deal with them \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 12)

*A study found that most adolescents are battling a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ of over two hundred phone notifications daily.*

12. a danger or something likely to cause harm \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 12)

*She called the rise of influencers “a public \_\_\_\_\_” and cautioned everyone to be critical of those offering financial advice online.*

13. a very large amount of something that is difficult to deal with \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 13)

*HR is preparing for the \_\_\_\_\_ of annual leave requests they always receive before the summer.*

14. quickly increase in size or importance \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 20)

*Office occupancy has soared, and median floorspace prices \_\_\_\_\_ to over seven hundred pounds per desk.*

## The humble email sign-off is not what it used to be

THE RISE OF THE PERMANENT OUT-OF-OFFICE IS A SIGN OF THE DIRE STATE OF WORK EMAIL

PILITA CLARK

- 1 Last week I discovered that something I never knew existed had already been deemed hopelessly naff.
- 2 Ending an email by showing off about a book you are “currently reading” is trending down as fast as the workout onesie, the *Sunday Times Style* magazine declared.
- 3 I found this news baffling. “Who puts something like that at the end of an email?” I asked anyone within earshot in the office.
- 4 Loads of people, came the reply. This was true, as a rummage through my own inbox confirmed.
- 5 It turns out people have been letting me know for ages that they have been reading books about the hidden cost of stress, at-home abortions, and something called “synchrodestiny” by the self-help guru Deepak Chopra.
- 6 They were not all trying to show off. Some worked for book publishers, where such sign-offs are encouraged. Others worked for performance coaches, who doubtless also nudge their staff to write such things.
- 7 But one was an actual performance coach and she ended her email with news of something else again: her current “wellbeing focus”, which was walking in nature three times a week.
- 8 I find this sort of behaviour more pointless than irksome. The fact that I didn’t notice what anyone was currently reading, or focusing on, until I went looking for it suggests these alerts are less useful than senders imagine.
- 9 I also find them less annoying than sign-offs that advertise a sender’s OBE or use of an app that tracks how much they cycle.
- 10 But this all confirms how far the humble email sign-off has travelled since the early days of office email, when it amounted to little more than “best wishes” followed by a name and job title. It is not exactly clear when the sign-off turned into yet another tool in the arsenal of self-promotion deployed in so much of modern corporate life, but I do not see it fading any time soon.
- 11 The same goes for a more sobering development that is itself a telling comment on the state of office email: the growing number of people resorting to a sign-off that politely tells emailers not to expect a reply.
- 12 One man I know who works in a sprawling international network where email bombardment is a constant menace has a sign-off that says: “I get a lot of emails and can’t reply to them all. Please call if it is urgent.”
- 13 He puts the message in brackets, which softens the blow, as does a journalist I know who uses a similar sign-off to manage the deluge of unsolicited emails she receives from around the world daily.
- 14 Some go to greater lengths by using something I often think of setting up myself: a permanent out-of-office message warning senders to prepare for disappointment.
- 15 Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson has long had one that, as of last week says this:
- 16 “Thank you for your email. Due to the volume of daily messages, which typically exceed in number the minutes in the workday, I am very sorry that I will not be able to respond to all of them.
- 17 “My students, colleagues and family remain my top priorities, and when I have an open window, I will work through the accumulated messages in an attempt to respond to as many as I can.” Edmondson then adds the addresses of others who deal with her schedule and speaking requests.
- 18 She tells me the message is permanent, but sometimes updated to deal with things that make her extra unavailable, like an assistant being on vacation.
- 19 “My view is that it’s better to alert people that the capacity strains will make it unlikely for me to respond to most messages, compared to simply failing to respond at all,” she says. “And truly at a rate of more than 500 a day it would not be feasible to respond to them all ... alas.” She’s right.

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20 Email has ballooned to the point that the average worker in the UK and US received at least 32 mails a day in 2022. That's on top of 21 instant messages, 13 text messages and 12 one-on-one phone calls, says Statista.

21 Other research suggests the number of emails received is higher. But whatever it is, it's too much. So use an email sign-off for personal PR if you want to. But don't be surprised if it's not seen, nor offended by a warning it may never receive a reply.

**FT**

Pilita Clark, 25 May, 2024.

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## 4 Understanding the article

### a. Choose the best way to complete each statement about the article.

1. According to an article in the *Sunday Times*, ending an email with a comment about a book you are currently reading is extremely ...
  - a. in vogue
  - b. tacky
2. The author ... received emails signed off with “currently reading”.
  - a. has
  - b. hasn't
3. The author assumed that many people using sign-offs were probably ... by their employers.
  - a. cajoled into it
  - b. discouraged from doing so
4. The author found these little personal sign-offs more ... than anything.
  - a. annoying
  - b. futile
5. According to the author, the email sign-off has transformed from a simple “best wishes” and a name and job title to a ...
  - a. more effective communication tool
  - b. self-promotion ploy
6. The author herself ... setting up a permanent out-of-office message to warn senders that they might be disappointed.
  - a. detests the idea of
  - b. has considered
7. Some people, like Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, alert people that they ... all the emails they receive.
  - a. cannot respond to
  - b. will delete
8. The author believes that email ...
  - a. will remain an essential part of the work
  - b. is in a dire state

## 5 Business language – register

a. Read and analyse the words and phrases from the article below. Decide if they are formal, neutral or informal.

1. had already been deemed
2. naff
3. trending down as fast as the workout onesie
4. declared
5. baffling
6. loads of people
7. as a rummage through my own inbox confirmed
8. capacity strains will make it unlikely for me to
9. it would not be feasible to

b. Think of a more formal or informal way to express each word or phrase in task a.

c. Rewrite these sentences from the article using a more formal and informal register.

1. Others worked for performance coaches, who doubtless also nudge their staff to write such things.  
Formal: \_\_\_\_\_  
Informal: \_\_\_\_\_
2. The fact that I didn't notice what anyone was currently reading, or focusing on, until I went looking for it suggests these alerts are less useful than senders imagine.  
Formal: \_\_\_\_\_  
Informal: \_\_\_\_\_
3. The same goes for a more sobering development that is itself a telling comment on the state of office email: the growing number of people resorting to a sign-off that politely tells emailers not to expect a reply.  
Formal: \_\_\_\_\_  
Informal: \_\_\_\_\_
4. One man I know who works in a sprawling international network where email bombardment is a constant menace has a sign-off that says: "I get a lot of emails and can't reply to them all. Please call if it is urgent."  
Formal: \_\_\_\_\_  
Informal: \_\_\_\_\_

## 6 Discussion

### a. Discuss these questions.

- What is your reaction to the “self-promotional” sign-offs mentioned in the article?
- Do you think people receive too many emails? Why (not)?
- Do you think it’s best to warn senders that they won’t receive a reply? Why (not)?
- What is the best solution to email bombardment?
- Based on the ideas in the article, will you make any changes in the way you handle emails?

## 7 Wider business theme – email writing

### a. Match each excerpt with the aspects of emails below. Comment on the tone/register of each excerpt and its effect on the reader.

1. Giving background information
2. Making a request
3. Opening
4. Out-of-office reply
5. Sign-off

- a. I hope your week is going well. I’m writing to you to ...
- b. “Live long and prosper” – *Star Trek*  
Cheers,
- c. I am writing to request your assistance with our DWXN-03 machine, which requires a service.
- d. My name is Jenny Arnaud and I am a journalism student at Sunhill University. I attended your recent talk on citizen journalism, and I found your points fascinating.
- e. Thank you for your email. I am away from the office until 5 June. If you have an urgent request, please contact Noah Simons.

### b. Research the five elements of email writing mentioned in the previous activity. Make note of emailing phrases for formal, neutral and informal contexts.

c. Collate the shared phrases to develop an emailing template you can use.

## Emailing language

	Informal	Neutral	Formal
<b>Greeting</b>	Hey	Hello James	Dear Ms Fines
<b>Opening</b>		I hope your week is going well. I'm writing because ...	
<b>Giving background information</b>		My name's Jenny Arnaud. I'm a journalism student at Sunhill University. I came to your recent talk on citizen journalism, and I found your points fascinating.	
<b>Making a request</b>			I am writing to request your assistance with our DWXN-03 machine, which requires a service.
<b>Signing off</b>	"Live long and prosper" – <i>Star Trek</i> Cheers,		
<b>Out-of-office reply/ Permanent no reply</b>		Thank you for your email. I'm away from the office until 5 June. If you have an urgent request, please contact Noah Simons.	