

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

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

- How many unread emails are there in your inbox?
- How do you decide which emails to reply to?
- What do you find the most annoying about emails?

2 Reading for gist

a. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. With the rise of other communication tools, email is no longer essential.
2. Answer every email if you want to get ahead professionally.
3. Most people are overwhelmed by email, but some still use it to promote themselves.

3 Key words

a. Choose the key words and phrases that match the definitions. 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 the key words are used in context.

accumulate	baffling	bombardment	dire	exceed	feasible
naff	nudge	pointless	rummage	strain	unsolicited

1. difficult or impossible to understand or explain _____

The disappearance of the front desk is completely _____. The security footage showed no one entering the building.

2. very extreme or serious _____

The team is in _____ need of training on how to use the new software.

3. not showing taste, quality, style etc _____

A bright pink suit? I think that sounds a bit _____.

4. search for something that is difficult to find _____

I am _____ through all my old documents. I need to find a copy of that contract.

5. encourage someone to do something in a gentle way _____

I am so glad my boss _____ me to apply for the position.

6. a waste of time, having no purpose _____

It seems _____ for us both to prepare the same presentation.

7. a situation in which so many questions, ideas or other things are directed at someone that they struggle to deal with them _____

If you don't prepare, a job interview can feel like a(n) _____ of tough questions.

8. not asked for _____

Sue is always ready to give _____ advice. Usually, it annoys me, but today, it was very helpful.

9. be greater than a number or amount or go past a limit _____

New user registration has _____ 200,000!

10. gradually increase or collect something over some time _____

If you don't read your emails daily, unread emails can quickly _____ in your inbox.

11. something that causes difficulty, worry, or anxiety _____

All the additional responsibilities of being office manager have put him under a lot of _____.

12. able to be done or achieved _____

Investors always want to see a sound business plan that shows it's a(n) _____ idea.

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.

Continued on next page

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.

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.

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.

FT

Pilita Clark, 25 May, 2024.

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4 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences true or false according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the sentences that are correct and, with a partner, say why the others are false.

1. According to an article in the *Sunday Times*, everyone should end an email with a comment about a book they are currently reading.
2. The author assumes employers probably encouraged many people to use sign-offs.
3. The author finds these little personal sign-offs more annoying than anything.
4. According to the author, the email sign-off has transformed from a simple “best wishes” and a name and job title to a self-promotion tool.
5. The author thinks that the sign-off will be a short-lived fad.
6. The author herself has not considered setting up a permanent out-of-office message to warn senders that they might be disappointed.
7. Some people, like Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, alert people that they can't reply to all the emails they receive daily.
8. The author thinks you shouldn't expect to receive a reply to all your emails.

5 Business language – register

a. Read and analyse the sets of words and phrases below. Decide if each phrase or word is formal (F) or informal (I).

1. had already been deemed / people already thought (it) was
2. naff / unstylish
3. becoming increasingly unpopular / trending down
4. declared / said
5. baffling / confusing
6. I asked anyone within earshot in the office / I asked anyone who could hear me
7. loads of people / several people
8. as a rummage through my own inbox confirmed / as I saw when looking through my inbox
9. capacity strains will make it unlikely for me to / I won't be able to
10. it will be impossible to / it would not be feasible to

b. Rewrite these sentences using a more informal register.

1. Others worked for performance coaches, who doubtless also nudge their staff to write such things.

Informal: _____

2. I find this sort of behaviour more pointless than irksome.

Informal: _____

3. "Who puts something like that at the end of an email?" I asked anyone within earshot in the office.

Informal: _____

4. Loads of people, came the reply. This was true, as a rummage through my own inbox confirmed.

Informal: _____

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What was your reaction to the 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 overwhelm?

7 Wider business theme – email writing

a. Match each excerpt with the aspects of emails below. Is each excerpt formal or informal?

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. Cheers / Thanks / Best
- 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/informal contexts.
- c. Collate the shared phrases to come up with an emailing template you can use.

Emailing language

	Neutral / Less formal	Formal
Greeting	Hi James	Dear Ms Fines
Opening	I hope your week is going well. I'm writing to you to ...	
Giving background information	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.	
Making a request		I am writing to request your assistance with our DWXN-03 machine which requires a service.
Signing off		
Out of office reply / permanent no reply	Thank you for your email. I am away from the office until 5 June. If you have an urgent request, please contact Noah Simons.	