FINANCIAL PREPAREDNESS

"One of life's most painful moments comes when we must admit that we didn't do our homework, that we are not prepared." ~ Merlin Olsen

Issue #24
July 23, 2021

If you did not receive a previous issue, let me know I will resend it to you.

Email

Email is a communication tool that can either significantly increase or decrease your productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. Most people have never thought about how to use it strategically. Instead of being its master, they have become its servant. I just finished reading the book <u>Unsubscribe: How to Kill Email Anxiety, Avoid Distractions, and Get Real Work Done</u> by Jocelyn Glei. I recommend it if you would like to learn how to use your email more thoughtfully, strategically and effectively.

Before I begin to discuss how to use email, it's crucial that you always keep its limiting factors in mind. First, when people communicate via email (or any other form of digital text messages), they think they're communicating efficiently when in fact they are barely communicating at all.   Digital text messages don't have any of the social cues (such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, inflection, etc.) that are really the primary way that humans have communicated for millennia. In the absence of such social cues, the human brain tends to assume the worst, so these messages have a negativity bias. If the sender just meant to strike a neutral tone, the receiver will tend to interpret the tone as negative. Consequently, people who communicate this way often find themselves getting into "flame wars" and alienating longtime friends and clients, possibly

forever.

Second, email is best used for less important and lower urgency communications, communicating with a large group of people, sending "FYI" information, or reaching out to someone who's busy or who you don't know very well (or at all). It's a terrible way (and usually counterproductive) to have a difficult or sensitive conversation, to deliver bad news, to criticize someone, or to discuss contentious and/or controversial subjects such as politics. You should have those types of conversations in Meatspace or at least over the phone. And if such a conversation begins via email, instead of quickly hitting "Reply" (the default choice, especially when you're upset and in Fight or Flight mode), you should take it offline as soon as possible.

Third, as far as our brain is concerned, checking for new messages is like pulling the handle on a slot machine. Most of the time, we don't get a payoff because the messages we received weren't personal messages composed by another human being and sent exclusively to us. But sometimes we get the coveted triple cherry. Because the "reward" of a personal message is delivered at random times, our brain is rewarded for merely searching for a reward almost as much as it is for getting the triple cherry.

Consequently, most people use email way too much. By "use," I mean they keep their email program(s) open (thus allowing new messages to arrive, which probably create distracting notifications), they check for new messages far too frequently, and they respond to messages too quickly. They allow email to crowd out the precious few hours of the day when they could be doing the crucial Deep Work that would allow them to make significant progress on their life's purpose.

So my first recommendation is to make the strategic decision of when you will check and/or process your email and then schedule it and create a notification to remind you. Since email is usually used for non-urgent communications, and since processing email requires you to make a lot of decisions (thus depleting your limited energy and willpower), I recommend you check and process email later in the afternoon after your best Deep Work of the day is done. I use the Alarmed app to remind me to check and process business and vendor email at 3:30 each weekday, and to process personal email at the same time on weekends. Other than that half hour window each day, I try to keep my email programs closed.

Your email is not your task list. Processing email creates an illusion of productivity because we're doing something and we can see the number of messages in our inbox go down. But processing email is probably not a key part of your job description. When you're on your deathbed, you're not going to wish that you had checked your email more often, or that you had processed more email. You probably need to deemphasize email so that you have the time and energy to focus on Deep Work and your life's calling. Recently I wrote about The 5 AM Miracle, in which Jeff Sanders recommends getting to Inbox Zero every day. But I think that's not only unrealistic, it's a Sisyphean task that distracts you and hinders your ability to do the great work of your life. You have only so much time and energy during the day, and achieving Inbox Zero daily is not your life's purpose.

Yes, having a lot of unread and unprocessed messages in your inbox does create "existential overhead," which can increase your anxiety and distract you from doing your best work. But I think it's like fighting kudzu in Georgia: Email is too established, it's spreading (since the most valuable marketing asset is a person's email address), and it grows too quickly. So eradication is not a realistic option. Instead, I think you need to keep it in check by using techniques to stem its growth and by scheduling times to hack it back.

I also recommend that you have different email addresses (and even use different email programs) for work, vendors and personal use. If you're an employee, you have less ability to control and customize your email, but at a minimum, I would use work email for business purposes only (especially since many employers monitor their email system), and try to avoid checking and processing work email outside of business hours (unless it's expected as part of your job); this will allow you to recharge by getting some needed downtime and perspective.

Most people have lost control of their personal email address because they have provided it to various vendors, and now it's out there "in the wild," available to who knows whom, and their inbox has become a river of unsolicited commercial messages. I heard of this trick many years ago, and it has served me well since then: Get your own domain name and set up an email account. There are now dozens of domain name extensions other than .com, so you can get almost any domain you want (mine ends in .me). Then, every time you need to provide an email address to a vendor, instead of giving them your real address (e.g., yourname@yourdomain.com), give them an address that is unique to them (e.g., for Apple, use apple@yourdomain.com) and create a forwarder that forwards messages sent to that address to your real address. That way, if the vendor ever starts to spam you or they provide your address to another vendor or a hacker gets your address from their computers, you can simply delete the forwarder to stop the messages, and you still have control of your real address.

I would avoid using "free" email services such as Gmail and Yahoo. If a product is "free" then *you are the product*. These surveillance capitalist companies make money by selling your private communications to the highest bidder. Despite Google's original "Don't Be Evil" motto (which it has since abandoned), Gmail is creepy. And here's something to consider: Even if you don't mind Google spying on your private communications, it's important to realize that Gmail *also spies on the emails you receive from senders who don't use Gmail, and neither you (almost certainly) nor Google ever asked them for permission to do so*. So if you don't value your own privacy, at least have respect for the privacy of others.

It is also important to realize that every unencrypted email (or any other electronic communications) you send or receive gets collected by the federal government's Utah Data Center, to be analyzed and stored permanently for who knows what purpose in the future. The Stasi would drool over such an arrangement. To protect your privacy (and that of your correspondents), I recommend you use an encrypted email service such as Proton Mail (I use the Thunderbird email client with this. Proton also offers an excellent VPN service that shields your web surfing from surveillance). Email that is sent between two Proton Mail users is encrypted and as far as I know cannot be spied on.

You should take advantage of the tools offered by your email program that allow you to filter, sort, prioritize and tag incoming messages. For example, in Apple Mail, under Preferences > Rules, you can automatically tag, process and take action on incoming messages in dozens of different ways. All of my clients are designated as VIPs so their messages don't get lost in the river of incoming messages. Spend some time setting up an automated system so you don't have to spend time, energy and decisions processing email manually.

Today, most email is quickly previewed on a phone, and if the subject line and preview look interesting, the recipient might read it later if he/she has time. Many if not most messages are never opened. So if you want someone to open your message, make the subject line and first sentence or two sound interesting enough to pique the recipient's curiosity. Make the subject specific and useful. And in the body of the message, state the bottom line up front or the reader may never get to it.

Because of the negative bias in digital text messages, it is critical that you strive to strike a positive, friendly tone. Take the time to craft your message to be diplomatic and avoid potential misunderstandings. Always take the high road and give people the benefit of the doubt. Usually you don't need to reply to a message right away, so if you're upset, wait at least 24 hours to respond so you can cool down and get some perspective. If something is really bothering you and you need to get it off your chest, compose a message (leaving the To field blank for now) and wait at least 24 hours before you send it. When composing any message, leave the To field blank until you're ready to send it. Don't compose or send difficult or contentious messages late at night when you're tired or hangry and your energy, decision making and willpower stores are depleted. Never say something about a third person in an email that you wouldn't say to their face. And never forward someone's personal message to you (especially with the header information!) to others without his/her permission.

Be proactive with your communication and make it easy for the recipient to say yes. For example, instead of just asking "Would you like to go to lunch next week?", state what days and times you're available and suggest a restaurant or two. If you're not communicating effectively and you keep going back and forth on the same email thread, pick up the phone or meet in person so you can bring the conversation to a close.

All other things being equal, I think the more email you send someone, the less they pay attention to you and the less likely they are to read your messages. So strive to keep your signal/noise ratio high and respect your recipients' time by sending them quality messages —only your best stuff.

In conclusion, since you started using email, it has probably slowly evolved from your servant to your master. Take a step back and reevaluate your relationship with email so that it can help instead of hinder you from reaching your goals.

Reader Feedback

"Hi Rob, I had to write and tell you that I've been devouring your last two newsletters. I'm

focusing like my hair is on fire. My work has taken off like a rocket and I'm happier than I've been for a long, long time. I have no problem with my exercise routine, reading inspirational things, journaling--it's all just effortless. You changed my life! Thank you so much!"

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I would love to hear from you! I thrive on feedback from readers. If you have any comments, suggestions, insight/wisdom, or you'd like to share a link to a great article, please email me.

Generally, I don't have time to answer questions about your specific situation, but if you have a general question that I think other readers also have, let me know and I will provide an answer in a future issue.

Feel free to forward this to a friend. If you would like to subscribe (it's free!) or unsubscribe, email me with either "subscribe" or "unsubscribe" in the subject line.

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Investments carry risk, are not guaranteed, and do fluctuate in value, and you can lose your entire investment. Past performance is not indicative of future performance. You should not invest in something you don't understand, or put all of your eggs in one basket.

Before starting a new diet or exercise regimen, you should consult with a doctor, nutritionist, dietician, or personal trainer.