

Ten Conversations Not To Have By Email

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We overuse email. Our over-reliance on email not only creates an unmanageable volume of messages; it also impedes communication and creates risks we might not even realize we're taking. In response, I offer ten suggestions for conversations that should not take place by email.

1. Front Page of the Paper. If whatever you're saying wouldn't look good on the front page of the paper, don't say it by email. You can't control who will see it. Today, someone might forward it. Tomorrow, someone's email archives may come under unexpected scrutiny. If it's embarrassing or you wouldn't anyone but the recipient to know it, don't communicate it by email. I remain astonished by how many otherwise smart and careful people ignore this principle.

2. Complicated Messages. If you start to compose an email message with great care—rolling up your sleeves, closing the door, turning on a special bright light, making an outline—then think twice about whether email is the right medium. Maybe it is. For example, you might want to communicate an entire message all at once with no room for ambiguity. If you were delivering it in person, though, you might adjust your message based on the recipient's reaction. Maybe presentation and body language will matter. In those cases, set your draft email aside and try something more old-fashioned.

3. Series of Dependent Questions. If you want to ask something and the answer will determine what you want to ask next, and then the next answer will determine the next question, and so on, the entire exchange can quickly balloon to 20 emails or more. A rapidly lengthening chain of emails usually signals that a conversation would work better. When you've exchanged four emails on the same topic, think about switching to another communications medium.

4. Criticism. It's really fun to bang out a nasty comment on something and send it with a flourish. Maybe someone really screwed up and you have a great opportunity to be the first one to tell them. Restrain yourself. At least wait a bit. And consider again whether you should deliver the message by telephone or in person. Even if you're just telling Person B bad things about Person A, you have no idea where that message will end up. The mere fact that you're thinking about Person A may lead you to address it to Person A without thinking. It happens! It's another good reason to keep seriously critical comments out of emails.

5. Incomplete Requests. Maybe you know you want someone to do something but you haven't pulled your thoughts together. So

you put the monkey on the recipient's back by sending an email and hoping the recipient will deal with it. More likely, though, the monkey will slip off the recipient's back and into the electronic wastebasket. Incomplete or poorly thought through requests sent by email just ask to be ignored. Either figure out what you really want the person to do — and give them what they need to do it — or have a conversation and work together to figure out how to get the project started.

6. No Traction. If you've been trying to get someone to do something via email and it isn't happening, stop using email. It's a lot harder to hide and ignore someone in a real-time two-way conversation.

7. You Should Know But Don't. When you need to ask a question the answer to which you should know, you may not want a written trail showing that you didn't know or weren't paying attention. Again, get on the phone or have an in-person conversation. It's less incriminating and less obvious.

8. Screw-Ups. If you screwed up in some other way, just remember that emails are forever. You may not want a permanent acknowledgment of your screw-up to live on in someone's email archive.

9. Building a Relationship. If you're communicating with a client or prospective client, or anyone else with whom you are trying to build a relationship that goes beyond just getting the work out the door, see if you can sit down in person, even briefly. It's more effective than exchanging dozens or hundreds of emails. Telephone conversations aren't quite as good as sitting down in person, but they usually work better than email. That's all especially true right at the beginning of a relationship.

10. Risk of Offense. People have thin skins, often particularly so when reading an email. If what you're saying might offend, think twice before saying it by email. You can probably say it more effectively and less offensively in a conversation.

These suggestions offer some great ways to reduce the volume of email, starting with the types of email most likely to cause trouble or not do their job.

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