Pippa's Guide to Managing your Inbox

It's strange to imagine that at one point, not that long ago, office life happened without emails. It was only the mid- nineties when emails started to become commonplace, at which point it suddenly became necessary for anyone in business to have an email address. After that it quickly became the preferred way to communicate. Curly fax paper's days were numbered! But this was only twenty odd years ago and yet it seems unimaginable now to think about functioning without email. Yet people coped fine! Meetings were arranged, deals were done, events were organised, costs were worked out, people were hired, fired and managed all by phone, in person, by fax or letter. Extraordinary!

Of course it goes without saying that sending an email is a wonderful thing in many ways. It's instant, it's easy, it's cheap, yet do you ever think our reliance on digital communication has gone too far?

For instance, am I the only person who has been asked if I'd like a cup of tea or coffee by email, by the person who is sat opposite me?

Am I the only one who has had incredible gossip sessions about an office member with another office member by email, when all three of us are within spitting distance? These kinds of juicy discussions were once the preserve of a session in the ladies loos, but now the internet is your chatting oyster too and the person you're gossiping about can be well within earshot.

Lastly, am I the only one who sometimes thinks, why are you sending me an email about that particular work conundrum when you could just as easily approach me at my desk and talk to me?

I doubt I am. And this is the downside of emails. They are ubiquitous and our inboxes have become cluttered and rained upon to an almost unmanageable degree at times. We have become email dependent. But ignore them at your peril because if a huge backlog builds up, important information can easily be missed or forgotten about. As a result your inbox must be looked after in the same way that we manage our bikini lines or shoe cupboards. Leave them too long and things become unruly, a mess, unmanageable and difficult to face.

So this is my guide on how to make sure your inbox knows who's boss (not a euphemism….)

1. Regular clear-outs

My friend put her iphone down on the pub table the other day and to my horror I noticed that the little red symbol above her email icon said 497.

497! I looked at her aghast and eventually, fortified by a large slug of my gin and tonic, managed to utter weakly 'But why would you let that happen?'

Once she'd deciphered what I was on about she was totally blasé. 'Oh you know how it is,' she said 'you get sent junk which you don't bother opening and it just builds up.'

WRONG! I don't know how it is and given that my friend can be one of the most disorganised people I've ever met I doubt she does either. You see firstly, if I have any regular junk emails coming in I always click on unsubscribe and take twenty seconds out of my day to get rid, thus avoiding twenty hours of my future being taken up by constantly deleting the hundreds of future emails they would no doubt send me.

Plus, call me OCD but I would not allow even one unopened email symbol on my phone. If something I don't want to read comes in it is deleted straight away. Apart from anything else how much storage do these non deleters/readers have?

Apply this to a work environment too. If you allow hundreds and hundreds of unread emails to block up your inbox, you'll never find anything and I guarantee important stuff will be missed. So my advice is to clear out as you go along. Keep on top of things as much as you can on a daily basis. Tidy inbox, tidy mind.

2. Scheduling time in for Emails

There will be some days when you're not at your desk but things will be pinging in nevertheless. If you're in meetings or it's just not convenient to address them then and there, switch your phone off. This is a better plan of action than replying to things in a rush or too hastily. You can always sit down for an hour at the end of the day and plough through everything. Otherwise you run the risk of being distracted from the job in hand or again missing something important.

The same goes if you have tasks to do at your desk. Stuff constantly coming in can be a huge distraction so anything that can wait, let it, just make a note on your 'to do' list to come back to it. You do have a 'to do' list right? Depending on your job it might even help to be very rigid about when you work on replying to and reading your emails. For instance, you could spend an hour first thing, then check again after lunch and then spend an hour wading through them before leaving.

3. Folders are your friends

A little tip – if I have a long 'to do' list and am really busy but have other emails coming in, I will have a quick scan of the latest message and if I think it can be dealt with extremely swiftly, that is to say in a minute or less with a quick, prompt response I'll do it then and there. If it's going to need a little more thought and a more considered response I move it over to my 'waiting' folder. I always know this is full of stuff to keep on top of so always check this folder as soon as I have some time again.

4. Work and Play

I also have a personal folder on my desktop. This is vital for two reasons. Firstly the separation between work and personal emails keeps my inbox organised and tidier and secondly it means my boss, when glancing over my shoulder, can't see quite what a good customer I am at ASOS, Top Shop and Amazon.

5. Would a phone call be better?

My last tip is more for society going forward. Coming back to what we touched on at the beginning I urge you fellow office workers to sometimes stop before dashing off yet another email in a thread which is 56 emails long and to ask yourself if the same conversation couldn't be had face to face. It goes without saying that some emails are totally necessary when you need to have written evidence of what you are suggesting or organising. But we mustn't become a nation of people who are incapable of expressing ourselves verbally. Talking to your co- workers helps you get to know one another, it's more fun and can often result in better productivity and better ideas. Jokes sound better when said out loud and humour in the workplace is something I'm all in favour of. Nuances of expression are more subtle in person and points can often be conveyed far more clearly and in the best way.

Happy chatting and here's to lovely tidy inboxes

Pippa xx