



# White Board

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## Email Obsessed: Professor Establishes Email Guidelines During the Summer

I AM NOT going to lie.... I'm completely obsessed with email. For several years, email has been deemed the most preferred channel of professional communication (Tanase, 2018). Like many Americans, every morning I wake up, and the first thing I do is open my email. I'm not the only one, approximately 46% (and 66% of millennial) Americans check their email before they even get out of bed (ReportLinker, 2017). I check my email more than "frequently" throughout the day. With my apple watch, the instant an email arrives my wrist vibrates—enticing me to quickly review my inbox!

There are generally two types of people when it comes to email. The first are considered inbox infinity, those whose inbox is overflowing with thousands of emails, many of which are unread. With hundreds of emails received daily, many inbox infinity users cannot catch up. Some even declare email "bankruptcy"—when a user actively chooses to ignore email messages because it becomes too impossible to respond to them all (Singh, 2017). Alternatively, there are those deemed inbox zero, those who strive to read, sort, and respond to all emails. Inbox zero does not mean there are zero emails in your inbox; however, the more common definition is an inbox with zero unread emails (Heaney, 2018). Some users feel they fall in between inbox infinity and inbox zero. The majority of email users strive for inbox zero. In fact, 66% feel that reaching inbox zero is relieving or amazing, while 51% feel it is borderline OCD or impossible (Adobe, 2018).

Inboxing is monotonous work. We need to remember that we are human beings—not human doings (Walker, 2017). I often feel like email inboxing is more human doing—doing every email in my inbox until I've achieved inbox zero! (Relief!). It's crazy to think that a little over a decade ago I decided I absolutely had to have email on my phone so I could stay informed. By getting a smartphone, I personally invited, even welcomed, my work home. Today, I

feel differently.

### *The Why*

Higher education has changed drastically over the past several decades, and the academic experience for students and faculty has been transformed by technology advances (Hall & Saroyan, 2018). Many of these changes have had a trickle-down effect, impacting work-life balance for faculty and increasing performance and productivity expectations (Sabagh, Hall, Saroyan & 2018). Achieving work-life balance can be difficult for academic faculty of every level (Owens, Kottwitz, Tiedt, & Ramierz, 2018). Many faculty are in the office the traditional 9-5, head home to eat, spend time with family, pets, or friends, and then continue to work into the night grading papers and answering emails, thus extending their workday by several hours. Steinberg (2017) reports most faculty clock an average of 57 work hours per week.

This workload and lifestyle is not sustainable. Burnout is real and can be detrimental to faculty's quality of life (Alves, Oliveria, Paro, 2019; Sabagh, Hall, Saroyan & 2018). In a recent study, higher education faculty participants report a "cutthroat culture that is very competitive and not fostering successful family life" (Wilton & Ross, 2017, p. 80). Faculty of all levels reported sacrifices related to research and work-related travel (Alves, Oliveria, Paro, 2019; Wilton & Ross, 2017). However, female faculty reported more sacrifice, less balance, higher levels of exhaustion, and more prevalent burnout (Kazley, Delligraine, Lemak, Mullen & Menachemi, 2016; Sabagh, Hall, Saroyan & 2018; Wilton & Ross, 2017). As a wife and mother of two children, both under the age of 6, I love my job, and it is really important to me; however, I make numerous sacrifices throughout the school year, so when my children started to notice my tendency to quickly respond to emails that were interrupting dinner, soccer games, and bath time, something had to change. I knew the summer was the perfect time for me to try to

disconnect from email.

### *Turning off my email*

When I was training for a marathon I read a book titled, *The Non-runner's Marathon Trainer*, by Whitsett, Dolgener, & Kole (1998) who emphasized accountability by sharing your intentions to run to a full 26.2 mile marathon. I applied the same theory to my no email project this summer. I started casually telling colleagues at conferences. They would smile and chuckle, frequently saying things like, "Oh really? I could never do that!" As a technology advocate, this added more fuel to my fire. I knew I had to do it. Because if I could do it—anyone could. But, I know myself. My obsession with email and timely responses is longstanding.

Most faculty do not completely shut down  
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Mid-Term Grades Due - Oct 7  
Fall 1 - Classes End - Oct 7  
Fall 1 - Exams - Oct 8  
Fall 2 - Classes begin - Oct 9  
Fall 1 - Grades Due - Oct 10  
Fall Break - Oct 14-15  
Final Date to Withdraw - Oct 16  
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**Obsessed**

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over the summer—many continue to check their email, produce scholarly articles, present at conferences, and prepare for courses (Kelchen, 2017; Williams, 2018). If I was going to make this work, I had to have a well thought out plan. I knew I couldn't commit to the entire summer break not checking email. I settled on a systematic plan to check my email once a week on Mondays. Typically, people are more focused on Mondays compared to other workdays (Mark, Iqbal, Czerwinski, Johns, 2014).

First, I developed an away message that stated I was out of the office for the summer. But we've all seen that message before and then 15 minutes later you get a response from them. I was intentional in my away message explaining when and how I would be checking my email, so those who contacted me were aware of my no email project. But, to hold myself really accountable, I decided to delete the email app from my phone. This was the clincher for me, because I physically couldn't check my email unless I logged in through a web browser or opened my laptop. I even decided to pack my laptop away in my bag in the evenings, so I wasn't tempted to open it during the week.

**Takeaways**

It is critical for faculty to understand how to manage a healthy work-life balance in order to not just survive and prevent burnout but to thrive amongst the multifaceted demands of academia (Owens, Kottwitz, Tiedt, & Ramirez, 2018). I spent 8 weeks implementing my no email project. Committing to removing email from my phone provided several takeaways regarding work-life balance.

- I've had a few slip ups throughout the week, especially during week one of implementation. Out of habit, I woke up and the first thing I did was grab my phone to open my email. I even found my thumb reaching for the missing email app.
- I was surprised how quickly I could review my inbox and delete unrelated or unnecessary emails to reach inbox zero in one mass sweep instead of reviewing constantly throughout the day. I also took advantage and unsubscribed from as many email subscriptions as I could to help reduce the future email flow.
- Each Monday, I tried my best to respond to every email, but I learned the danger of sending an email is that you also are likely to get a return email in response causing another email.
- I discovered my apple watch would

tell me to "breathe" on Mondays when I was checking my emails. When my colleagues couldn't reach me, many texted me explaining they sent an email and encouraging me to check it. Unless it was critical, I held my ground until Monday.

- I felt more focused when I was just checking my email and not juggling other work day distractions, leaving me to be more conscientious as a responder.
- I was able to spend quality time with my family and investing in personal self-care by doing things I wanted to do such as re-engage in personal hobbies.
- I have always believed in quick email responses, but as cliché as it may sound – the world did not stop turning because I waited 6 days to respond to an email.
- I feel more relaxed and excited to start the academic year because I've taken a break from my professional responsibilities.

Removing email has helped me to achieve the healthy work-life balance I've been seeking. Because my phone and watch were not buzzing every other minute, I found myself to practicing self-care, by being more present with my family and more committed to my personal scholarly goals. Kushlev & Dunn (2015) found individuals who were limited to checking their email only three times a day were less stressed. I physically felt less stress on the days I didn't check my email. I plan to schedule times to batch work my inbox for the future. Very little experiential research has been done on email and well-being. When burnout is looming, faculty should utilize self-care strategies and disconnect (Owens, Kottwitz, Tiedt & Ramirez, 2018). For me, this summer it was turning off my email. This strategy is not for everyone, but if you are looking for a way to provide more work-life balance in the summer, I would encourage you to give it a try!

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