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Why All My Emails Are the Lengths of Texts



Replying to emails with extreme brevity keeps a leader from getting diverted by the agendas of others, says WSJ Leadership Expert C. L. Max Nikias. *Photo / IStock Photo*

By C. L. Max Nikias

A compelling reason exists for all high-level managers to scale back the amount of time they spend on email—and it harkens back to an Industrial-Age observation by Henry David Thoreau in “Walden” that is perhaps even more true in this Digital Age: People have “become tools of their tools.”

The very point of being a leader is to move an organization in a meaningful direction—yet email can have the opposite effect, blocking the leader from accomplishing anything proactive or of lasting substance.

I’ve had to restrain myself accordingly. Rather than spending my time glued to a screen and responding endlessly, I keep all of my emails brief—no more than an average text message. I am now certain that any topic that requires further deliberation is more effectively and more efficiently hashed out by phone or in a face-to-face meeting rather than in a rambling series of lengthy email exchanges.

As I’ve transitioned from professional, academic roles to leadership positions, I’ve come to appreciate an overriding principle: Effective leaders must maximize efficiency

and speed on some tasks, in order to devote thoughtful focus to others. Email can throw a leader off course if used as anything more than a quick messaging system. After all, the leader has to keep the big picture in mind, and therefore must avoid being redirected constantly by other’s agendas.

Across the multiple email accounts I regularly use, I receive over 300 emails every day. In addition, I regularly initiate emails to my senior team to track projects they are overseeing. Even at one minute per email, I would spend half my waking

day on this pursuit. Instead, on an average day, I have reduced my email usage down to about two hours, far less than the startling 7.4 hours the average American professional spends.

This makes me more productive while allowing me to be properly briefed on the priorities that matter the most. For example, USC a few weeks ago completed the largest campus expansion in our history. While I visited the site regularly, our capital construction managers would also update me by email with designs and photos of everything from brick samples to stained glass windows, with brief summaries of the development's progress. I offered approvals and requests for simple changes in text-sized emails. However, if there was an issue that required further deliberation, I would initiate a phone call that rendered further emails moot.

Since I treat emails like many people treat text messages, you may ask how I treat actual text messages. In short, I treat them just like emails, but with more urgency: While I expect my emails to be answered reasonably quickly, if I send a text to a direct report, they know I need to hear back right away.

It has been gratifying to see my policy rubbing off on my direct reports and senior colleagues. They've learned that the best way to make their case isn't through flowery language, but by laying out facts and issues in the most succinct manner possible.

Granted, many things cannot be communicated with such brevity. And

that's fine. After all, the crucial nuances of human communication don't translate well into cyberspace anyway. No healthy organization can run purely on email, especially not text-sized ones.

As an engineer who was active in the development of many of the digital media technologies that underpin the internet today, I've become convinced that no technology can replace a direct, person-to-person encounter. Any issue that requires a deeper discussion or multi-stakeholder decision should be done face-to-face or, if that is not possible, over the phone—but certainly not by email.

I meet with all of my direct reports as a group, each week to discuss every important decision point the organization is facing. Unlike my brief emails, these meetings take more than half the business day, and I expect in-depth discussions that allow my senior officers to weigh in on issues both within and outside of their regular portfolios of responsibility. It is there that the most important decisions are made and the most important principles are laid out for our organization. And it is the reliable, weekly timing of these longer face-to-face discussions that allow us to keep our email usage to a minimum.

Previous generations of leaders knew nothing comparable to the seductive trap of email. And now this generation must know how to resist that siren call, relying—for the most important kinds of communication—on the methods that have withstood the test of time: talking and meeting in person.



University of Southern California president C. L. Max Nikias holds eight patents in digital signal processing and is a member of the National Academy of Engineering, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a charter fellow of the National Academy of Inventors (NAI).