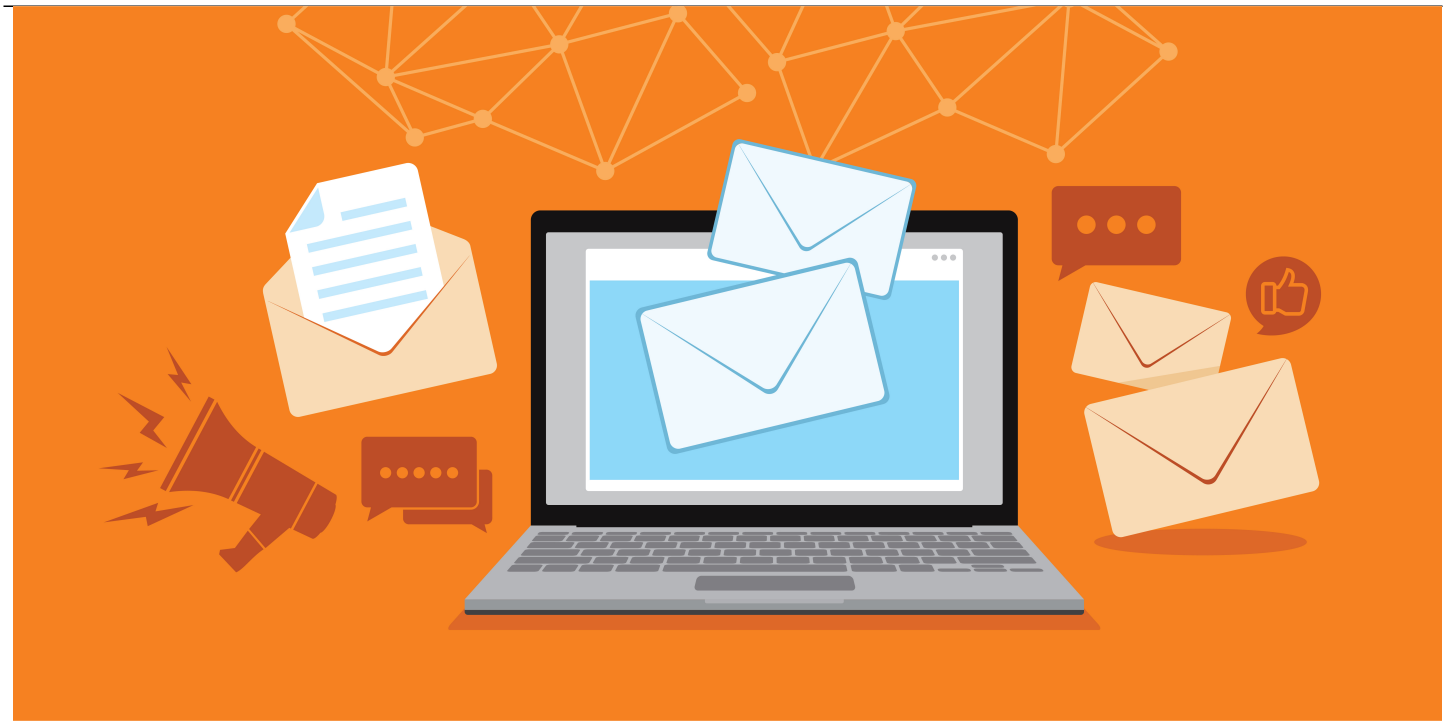


Career Path: Write Better Emails Today

Career Development



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Just to mention it, maybe you shouldn't write so many emails. I share below how to make your emails awesome but that assumes you need to write one at all. Sometimes you don't. You know emails are terrible for emotionally charged situations. Did you also know that the best predictor of how many emails a person receives is how many they send? If you find yourself plagued with emails, consider the anti-Nike approach: Just don't do it.

But I get it. Emails are unavoidable, often necessary, and sometimes useful. When I managed a global legal team, I loved being able to pass on assignments at the end of my day knowing that colleagues half a day behind me (or ahead) would still have time to handle them. I imagined that the sun never set on our hard-working team. Allowing for asynchronous communication, as in I write when I have time and you respond when you have time, permits us both to maximize our productivity.

Thus, I start with the premise that you must write at least some emails. So, let's write the best possible emails, shall we?

Master Skills to be Effective In-house Counsel

- Why It's So Hard Being a Good In-house Lawyer (the challenge);
- The Day You Became Smarter (writing plainly and clearly);
- Taming the email monster (this article);
- Maybe Don't Go to that Meeting (avoiding time-wasting meetings);
- Persuade Like Aristotle (influencing others); and
- Listen Up Already! (engaging with others).

10 secrets to better emails

1. Use clear subject lines.

Your subject line should describe the topic and whether the message is for information only or whether action is required. Edit outdated or unclear subject lines when you respond to emails you receive.

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2. State your purpose early.

The very first sentence of your message should tell readers what you want from them. If you are requesting specific action or follow up, make sure the deliverable is clear.

3. Set deadlines.

Always set a deadline and highlight it in bold or another color. Be realistic in setting deadlines, recognizing that your colleagues have other priorities.

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4. Only include necessary information.

Give only the background information or context necessary for your reader to understand your message, no more. Delete unnecessary text, including prior messages, as appropriate.

5. Avoid jargon.

Do not use legalese, terms of art, acronyms, or other abbreviations that your reader may not know.

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6. Have a good review process.

Review the content of your message to ensure it is short, simple, and focused. Consider asking a colleague to review important messages to check they are clear.

7. Keep your distribution narrow.

Have a specific reason for each person you send your message to. Only send emails to persons who must act on the message. The broader your distribution, the less likely an individual reader feels it was intended for them.

8. Separate emails to smaller groups.

If you have to send mails to a lot of recipients, consider sending multiple individual mails to smaller, relevant groups of people.

9. Keep emails to five sentences or fewer.

Challenge yourself to write concisely. See five.sentenc.es/ for inspiration. It's not always possible, but the challenge of reducing a long reply to five sentences helps clarify your key points. You can usually eliminate a lot.

These tips are powerful because people can implement them easily. You just have to want to do it and then be mindful to what you are doing. Thus, I will end with my final tip to writing better emails:

10. Don't hit send before reviewing your mails against this checklist.

It is hard to write emails perfectly the first time. But editing them is easy.

I wish you happy editing.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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