

Answering to the inbox:

Tips for improving your email habits

With the shift to remote working, even more of our professional communications now happen through the medium of a blinking cursor. Ensure you're making the most of the inbox, with these tips to better manage your email.



1. DON'T click on suspicious links and DO confirm instructions by phone

Lawyers are often targets of email spoofing and phishing schemes where fraudsters send emails purporting to be from a trusted colleague or third party in an effort to trick a lawyer or staff member into clicking on a dangerous link or downloading a dangerous attachment.

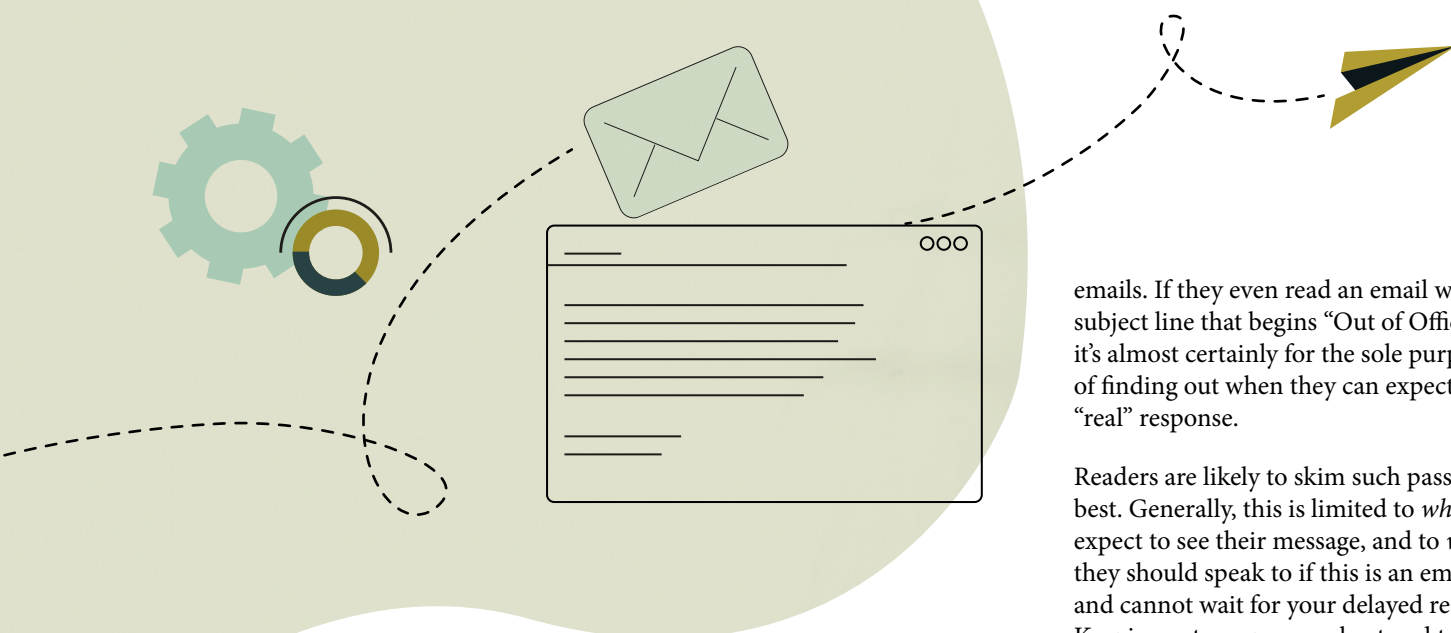
Never click on an attachment or link within an email unless you recognize the sender's email address (their *exact* email address, with no misspellings or changes). Even if you know the sender, it's a good idea to avoid clicking on anything that is out of the ordinary or unexpected.

And if you receive instructions involving the transfer of funds from a client or colleague by email, always confirm those instructions by phone or in-person before taking any action, especially, if it is a change to previous instructions or banking information. **Using a different mode of communication is essential to make sure you are talking to your client, and not the fraudster.**



2. Use "safe senders" lists to avoid missing important emails

Most email applications now use algorithms and artificial intelligence to automatically sort your incoming emails and emphasize what they *think* you want to see. These decisions can evolve over time based on which emails the user has opened or deleted in the past. While these functions are often



helpful, features like Outlook's "focused" inbox or junk folders can sometimes keep you from seeing important information if you're not careful (like LAWPRO's annual insurance renewal reminders sent every October).

Keep your filters up-to-date by adding important contacts, like LAWPRO, to your contacts or safe senders list to ensure you don't miss any communications you're waiting on. Telling your program to never block or filter a particular domain (such as @lawpro.ca) ensures no messages from contact companies will fall through the cracks.



3. Emphasize action items and deadlines

No matter how pithy we try to make our emails, sometimes there is a lot of information to share, issues to cover, or questions to ask. When drafting, always keep the reader in mind, and structure your writing in a way that makes it easiest for them to

absorb what you're saying and respond to *all* requests.

If the email includes an action item or question that requires a response, break that out into its own paragraph at the end of the message. If your email includes *multiple* such requests, it's a good idea to bold each of them as well.

If the email covers multiple topics or issues, use numbered headings to separate each subject and organize your thoughts. And if your message is particularly lengthy and includes multiple questions or requests, enumerate each request a second time at the end with a bullet point summary of exactly what you need the recipient to do in response to the email.



4. Away Messages: Don't bury the lead

Lawyers' tendencies toward prolix prose can easily infect every aspect of their writing. It's especially detrimental in automatic form

emails. If they even read an email with a subject line that begins "Out of Office," it's almost certainly for the sole purpose of finding out when they can expect a "real" response.

Readers are likely to skim such passages, at best. Generally, this is limited to *when* you expect to see their message, and to *whom* they should speak to if this is an emergency and cannot wait for your delayed response. Keeping auto responses short and to the point ensures key information isn't missed.

Also, remember to *update* these messages each time you turn them on. You don't want to gently inform the sender that you will respond to their email on a specific date that is already three months past.



5. Use carbon copy fields and @ functions to specify who needs to take action

If your email is going to multiple recipients, distinguish those that need to take action based on the email by putting their names in the "To" field, while including those that only need be informed of the email's content in the "CC" field.

Email programs like Outlook also allow users to call out specific recipients within the body text email by using the @ symbol before their name (e.g., "@ John Smith please send me your thoughts on this before Friday"). The recipient is then alerted that they are specifically mentioned in the email, and the relevant passage will be highlighted for them in the text.



6. Sort your to-do list and your have-done list with folders

Keep track of your communications (and, let's face it, your files) with a standardized format for subfolders within your email application. Folders can be organized by client, with subfolders for distinct matters and files. These subfolders can be further delineated by action items or steps within a given matter (such as court applications, specific filings, third-party correspondence, etc.)

The format you use for organizing subfolders can then be extended to your email subject lines. A standardized subject format such as “*Client – Matter – Topic*” will allow you to easily locate what you need using the application's search function (e.g. *Parking Co. – Hamilton Lot Purchase – Easement*).

The subject line of received emails can be easily altered to conform to your personal format in Outlook and many other email applications by opening the email, double clicking on the subject line, changing the text, and then saving the email with the new header.



7. Respond quickly, except when you shouldn't

Waiting for a response to an important email can be frustrating. If you know you won't be able to provide a full response to an email that day, alleviate the sender's stress by providing a quick response acknowledging the email and providing an estimated period in which you expect to be able to give a more fulsome reply.

However, quickly and impulsively responding to a rude, frustrating, or confusing email can sometimes make a situation worse or cause you to respond in a way you later regret. In such circumstances, setting the email aside



and responding after a brief walk outside, or even the next morning, can lead to a more constructive communication.

Quick responses are great, except when they're not.



8. Don't force your schedule on others

Working from home means we're always at work. While it's important to separate your work and home life as much as possible, working from a home office or kitchen table means it can be especially convenient to “time shift” and do some work in the evening if other personal responsibilities crop-up during the day.

But remember that receiving a non-emergency work email at 11 o'clock at night can be frustrating for those that didn't time shift

and need personal time away from “work thoughts.” If you are sending an email late at night or early in the morning, and it's not an emergency, it's a good idea to schedule it to be automatically sent first thing during business hours. Alternatively, you can state at the beginning of the email that you are time-shifting and you do not expect a response until the next business day.

Keep learning new tricks

Email programs are always changing, often for the better. Make the most of your time in front of the screen by exploring the application. To learn more, check out our articles on “Paying attention to the fraud behind the curtain: Don't get fooled by spoofed email addresses” and “A place for every email and every email in its place: Improving your inbox organization” at practicepro.ca. And remember to add the domain “lawpro.ca” to your safe senders list to ensure you receive more practice tips as well as insurance renewal information. ■

Shawn Erker is Legal Writer & Content Manager at LAWPRO

Add important contacts, like LAWPRO, to your contacts or safe senders list to ensure you don't miss any communications you're waiting on. Telling your program to never block or filter a particular domain (such as @lawpro.ca) helps avoid missing messages you want.