Just send an email

Anti-patterns
for email-centric
organizations

Cesare Pautasso

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Contents

Just send an email

Email is the worst form of communication on the internet, except for all of the other forms of communication on the internet.

(Dan Cohen, @dancohen 12 May 2016)

Introduction

It's 2070, yet another attempt to replace email messaging has fizzled. You are stuck with an overflowing inbox and wonder why to get anything done you have to "just send me an email about it". Email to ask for permission, email to inform everyone about new regulations, email that lose elections, endless email conversations to settle on a place and time for very important meetings. Critical data files buried within compressed email attachments that get lost right before you need to take a look at them. Even email you have to send to yourself for making the big television screen show those nice pictures taken with your phone.

Even if today there is probably no better solution to a-synchronous inter-personal communication than email, there are many ways to use it. In this book we have collected many, I am afraid too many, examples of incorrect, inefficient or simply strange or funny ways of using email communication between human people who are supposed to work *together* in large and small organizations. Despite the age of the medium (the first electronic mail 'msg' over the Interwebs was 'snt' in late 1971), these anti-patterns are still abundant across what we call email-centric organizations.

We sincerely wish that you will not recognize many of the email anti-patterns documented in this book, but in case you do – there is hope. By giving a name

to the problem, you start realizing a solution should and can be found. To do so, you can take advantage of the experience distilled in these pages and read the suggestions that accompany each anti-pattern.

In case your organization has already graduated to a data-centric or process-centric maturity level, congratulations! Still, be aware that the risk of taking the shortcut: "just send it by email" is always lurking somewhere near.

Anti-Patterns for email-centric organizations

Just send an email: it's the way we do it here.

Anti-patterns are bad practices that despite their negative consequences continue to be applied due to their low cost, ease of use and apparent good fit to solve pressing problems. It is possible to outgrow them by learning that a better (more effective and with less unintended negative consequences) solution exists.

In this book you will find the anti-patterns we have uncovered so far by observing how people communicate within *email-centric organizations*. Email-centric organizations are those organization where the main – or in the extreme case, the only – form of internal communication relies on email exchange. Email are the only available mechanisms for information dissemination and sharing, for discussion and decision making, for systems and application integration, for getting stuff published on the Web, and also for running and managing critical business tasks and processes.

What would happen if next time you log in, you find out all your email is gone? Email-centric organizations are those which cannot survive after their email server crashes.

Since email is so important, doing it wrong can become a critical productivity killer, an incredible communication bottleneck, and a wasteful distraction for the collective attention span of your organization. Especially when the anti-patterns we feature in the current version of this book are involved:

- Unsecured Sensitive Mail
- Monday Morning Mail
- 5pm Reply
- Happy Holidays
- Redirect
- Ticketless Support
- Room.Booking.Mail
- FAQ Autoreply
- Apply by Mail
- Process Patch
- On Behalf
- To for Two
- Attached Body
- Datamail
- Dear Tpyo
- Lightning Reply
- Useless Acknowledgement (Uck)
- ok?
- Re:gret
- Untimely Reminder
- Fw'd:CC'd
- Eager Undetected Reply
- Unintended Reply-To-All
- Unfinished Reply

- Fuzzy Link
- Collaborative Edit
- Web Master Mail
- Email from God
- META SPAM

More anti-patterns are currently being considered for addition:

- Black Hole
- Broadcast Unsubscribe
- Chattymails
- Cry Wolf!!
- Friday Evening Mail
- Mail from the Grave
- Pre-escalated Reminder
- Private Side-Mail
- Redundant Mail-Call-Meet
- Social Spam
- Empty Reply
- Faked Reply
- FAQ Auto-reply
- Total Recall
- Two-step Mail Merge
- Unwanted Newsletter
- Neverending Story

Let us know if you recognize some of the anti-patterns and would like to share how they affect your organization and you attempt to deal with them. There are probably many more that we are missing, so do not hesitate to drop us a line if you would like to suggest some other ones.

How do you know you are in an email-centric organization?

To find out, please answer the following questions:

- To apply for a position, did you have to send them your CV by email?
- Do you schedule interview slots by sending an email to everyone asking them about their availability?
- Did you get your job offer by opening an email attachment?
- Your first day, did you get a new email account as you walked in the office?
- Do they usually send out a company-wide email to welcome newcomers?
- Did they deliver your fresh copy of the employee handbook via email?
- How often people reply to all on your department/company-wide mailing list?
- To go out for lunch, do you invite your colleagues by email?
- Do you need to send an email to reserve a meeting room?
- Are meeting agendas discussed and agreed-upon over email?
- Do people frantically go through their inboxes during meetings to lookup information?
- Are meeting minutes shared and approved via email?

- When a new team or department is created, does it get its own institutional contact email address?
- Are random news and company-wide decisions broadcast by the boss to everyone at random times?
- To buy something, do you have to send someone an email with the shopping list?
- To get a virtual machine up and running, do you have to send the specs by email?
- To update something published on a website, do you have to send an email with the corrections?
- When they relaunch their corporate website, do they suggest you should send them an email to ask for directions if you get lost in the redesign?
- To print something, do you have to first send it via email for approval?
- To print something, after it's been approved, do you have to send it via email to the print bureau?
- Do you submit travel authorization requests by email?
- Do you keep your flight tickets and hotel reservations in your inbox?
- Do you have to send your presentation slides by email so that they can be displayed on the conference room beamer?
- Do you approve expense reports by replying to an email?
- To get fired, do people get the pink slip via email?

If you notice yourself nodding in agreement while answering most of these questions, chances are that

you find yourself in a place where email is the main or even the only communication channel.

While of course email is a powerful, cheap and fast communication tool both within and across organizations, most of the previous cases (e.g., booking a room!) are an actual real-life example of what in this book we call "email anti-pattern".

Keep reading to find out how to do better.

Icons

Throughout the anti-pattern collection presented in this book you will find the following icons. We choose them to structure the pattern description and highlight its most important elements.

This is the anti-pattern core definition.

This is how you can refactor (or fix) the problem caused by the anti-pattern. Consider using this approach instead.

This is a typical example of the email content that could be associated with the anti-pattern.

This is the explanation of the root cause of the problem. Understand it and you will be on your way to the refactored solution.

This is how the anti-pattern affects your personal productivity.

In addition to hurting the communication efficiency within your organization, some anti-patterns have important security implications. This is where we discuss them.

This is where you might find some ironic remarks. Approach the paragraph with care, or skip it, that's ok. If you do read it, at least we can say you have been warned.

How to politely explain the problem to the sender? This is a ready-made reply that you can copy and paste in case you would like to point out the consequences of the anti-pattern and turn it into a teachable moment.
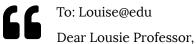
Dear Tpyo

⚡ Dear Tpyo,

I could not care less how to spell your name right.

What's the worst possible offense you can do to an academic?

Misspell his or her name, of course.

❝ To: Louise@edu

Dear Lousie Professor,

In academia, next to the institutional reputation, one's name is like a personal brand in which people invest during an entire career.

Please learn how to spell it correctly, if you would like to get an answer to your email.

Also if you are not an academic, I am sure you will enjoy to begin reading a fresh new email not addressed to a typo. Whether it's intentional or not, the sheer level of disrespect to misspell someone's name is hard to fathom. Especially in a professional email reply when the correct spelling was right there in the business signature of the original message.

Also Bryan (Brian), Candice (Candace), Lara (Laura), Laura (Lauren), Theresa (Teresa), Sara (Sarah), Darcy

(Darcie), Christy (Christie/Kirsty/Kirstie), Vanessa (Venessa), Kelly (Kelley), and Louise will be grateful if you spell their name right.

If you choose to invest into a personalized greeting (Hi Leslie!) replying to an email from Liselle (clearly spelled out in her email address, salutation and signature), you might as well radically simplify your opening with a plain and friendly Hi!

When in doubt, here is a useful trick which requires little effort to master.

 Copy and paste the name from the signature of the mail you are replying to. On Thunderbird, 'Shift+Ctrl+V' will even paste the name and remove the formatting so that it will look like you typed it yourself.

If only my email client was smart enough to start writing that address line by itself!

Re:gret

⚡ The email you put off responding to because you want to give it your full attention - and thus never answer, giving the sender the impression you don't care, when in fact it is the most important thing in your inbox.

This is more than a simple case of procrastination, you truly wish you had – right now – the time to give the email your full attention, properly draft a response, revise it, and send an answer that makes a good impression.

Your regret grows as the email lingers in your inbox, apparently yet another unanswered message, but in reality something you wish you could have taken care of yesterday.

Precrastination would also not help in this case: answering the email will require to dedicate significant time and effort to get it done. This is not something you can do while checking your inbox right before boarding your flight. And if you'd send a half-backed answer mistyped on a phone chances are you will regret it later.

As your email debt grows, you will keep postponing sending your answer because of the growing embarassment between not wanting to send a quick acknowledgement (that would be too late) and not yet having

done it (you have started several attempts but you are
a perfectionist).

How to break such "mail-castination" or
"mail-fermentation" paralysis?

- You cheat yourself into responding by flagging the
  email as unread.
- You get a (friendly and timely, but still dreaded)
  reminder, which triggers a cascade of events that
  make you unable to keep deferring your answer
  (which you suspect may not be liked when they
  read it).
- You realize that the email was sent to a mailing list
  and everyone but you already answered it.
- If it's that important, tell everyone to hold on while
  you work on it. Giving a timeframe for your reply
  may help, if you expect it will be a while.
- In the worst case, you wait until April 30th. Why?
  It's the email forgiveness day, when you can reply
  to your **re:gret**s without too much shame.

Email Anti-Patterns Summaries

- Unsecured Sensitive Mail

Whatever you send by email, unencrypted, is available for anyone to read.

- Monday Morning Mail

How do you catch the attention of the busy professional with an overflowing inbox?

- 5pm Reply

A polite clarification question (what did you mean?) always at the end of the business day (the next email will need to wait until tomorrow).

- Happy Holidays

Send your seasons greetings on a real card next time!

- Redirect

You send an email politely asking for something and the reply politely informs you to go send your request to someone else.

- Ticketless Support

Any trouble? just send an email and. someone. will. help.

- Room.Booking.Mail

Could you please book the meeting room for tomorrow?

- FAQ Autoreply

When you send a very specific question and they immediately respond with a generic FAQ answer like they didn't even bother to read your email.

- Apply by Mail

Please kindly submit your application to this email address.

- Process Patch

Exploit email to exchange at any time whatever information is not explicitly foreseen by the process you are supposed to follow.

- On Behalf

How to make it difficult for everyone that receives your email to answer you directly by replying to the email?

- To for Two

When you send 1 email to 2 (or N) people, nobody feels in charge and you get 0 answers.

- Attached Body

An empty email with an attachment containing the actual message.

- Datamail

Email used for asking a person to read or write data into files, databases, or information systems.

- Dear Tpyo

People misspelling my name when replying to an email my name is in, irks my soul.

- Lightning Reply

Lightning replies reach your inbox while your email client is still working on sending out the original message.

- Useless Acknowledgement (Uck)

Acknowledgements carrying zero information. Did they actually read my mail?

- ok?

Unnecessary informal request for validation. Do they really think I wouldn't understand this?

- Re:gret

The email you put off responding to since you want to give it your full attention - and thus never answer, giving the sender the impression you don't care, when in fact it's the most important thing in your inbox.

- Untimely Reminder

Broadcasting reminders via email addressed to an entire organization five minutes before the event can be a symptom of desperation.

- Fw'd:CC'd

When someone forwards me an email I was already carbon-copied on.

- Eager Undetected Reply

When sending out email requests to do something with a long due date, do not confuse acknowledgements (which tend to arrive quickly) with the actual task results (which normally arrive around the time you expect them, but could show up earlier than you think).

- Unintended Reply-To-All

Replying to all recipients with the intention of privately replying to the original sender only. Never happens.

- Unfinished Reply

If you ask n questions in an email, at most n-1 will be answered.

- Fuzzy Link

For more information visit my homepage! (Nothing happens when you click on homepage)

- Collaborative Edit

Can someone please send me the latest version?

- Web Master Mail

Please post this somewhere on our website.

- Email from God

Dear all, effective immediately...

- META SPAM

Dear all, as you may have noticed today you are receiving some SPAM messages.

Conclusions

Do I really need to send an email?

If you have not learned anything else from this book, you should remember this. Next time you click on your trusty "New Message" button, think about:

1. Do I really need to send an email?
2. Do I really need to send it right now?
3. Do I really need to send this mail to everyone?

Chances are you can avoid many of the anti-patterns presented in this book if you learn when it is a really great idea to answer *no* to such questions.

If you are convinced the email is ready to go, breathe and think about:

1. Do I really need to squeeze so many topics into one message?
2. Did I forget to reply to some of the issues raised in the previous message?
3. Should I maybe give them a quick call to resolve the matter right away instead of hopelessly resending the message once again?

When in doubt, save it as a draft, do not send it (yet) and revise it after a good night sleep the next morning.

If you are still in doubt, ask a colleague for feedback about your message content and style, but please – don't do it over email, get up and go talk to them.

@JustSendAnEmail

We hope you have enjoyed reading about email anti-patterns as much as we have writing about them in this book and that you will consider leaving a (virtual) copy on the desk of your friends and colleagues, in case you would like to drop them a hint on how to improve their email life.

You can also send them an email with a link to the email anti-patterns website[1] where you can find a short summary of every anti-pattern described in this book.

Follow us on twitter @JustSendAnEmail[2] if you would like know when we add more email anti-patterns to the collection.

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[1]http://www.email-anti-patterns.com
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