

Mindful Work

Mindful emails

Email is taking up more and more of our day. It's the primary form of communication in the work environment. Yet ask almost anyone, and they will say that email is one of the most clumsy forms of communication, and probably everybody has a horror story or two where something 'said' on email has been misinterpreted and created a problem.

So how can we take a more mindful approach to receiving, reading, writing and managing emails?

Managing our email system

The first point is simply to do with how we manage our time with regards to emails. There is good evidence now that we are becoming addicted to emails and evidence of withdrawal symptoms in the absence of email communication. We need to establish a healthy relationship with our email system; one that is established on our terms.

It could be quite an easy fix to develop a new protocol for yourself, for example only answering emails once an hour. For many of us, the mornings are our prime working time, and yet it's also when most emails arrive. You might choose to give yourself clear working time for a couple of hours, or even give yourself one or two mornings a week where you close down your email and set up an auto responder. You might also choose to switch off automatic notifications, so that new incoming emails that interrupted your workflow. This helps us stay focused; multitasking and jumping between different tasks creates significant inefficiency.

Clearing out the inbox may also be useful. Have over a thousand emails in an inbox can in itself seem to express an overload of information and things to do. Simply clearing out those that need no more action, flagging those that need attention, and sorting emails into separate folders (also using rules for where incoming mail go) and doing this regularly, say every Friday afternoon, can help a lot.

Reading between the lines

The second point is addressing the emotional attachment and cravings we have with email. Take some time, even just one second, before you open any email, to simply pause and realise that there may be a strong sense of anticipation about the content of emails.

Try to be clear what it is we're really looking for; maybe we're hoping for good news, praise, amusement or it's simply that we want someone to communicate with us; or conversely we may fear what the email might contain, for example bad news, criticism or anything else which creates stress.

When it comes to reading a new email, it helps to stay aware of all this emotional sensitivity. We all know that emailing is a very poor mode of communication, so we need to keep this in mind and try not to read too much between the lines, because there is every chance that we will interpret what's being said wrongly. There is also a tendency, with emails that may contain challenging content, to read too quickly, or scan read, which may lead us to only focus on the bad news.

So make sure that you read the email fully, that you haven't missed anything that may be important, and that you're not jumping to conclusions. Where content of the email, or its style and apparent tone of communication, is difficult, challenging, or downright critical, it's all the more important that we take one step backwards in terms of our emotional engagement.

It helps to bring to mind the person who wrote the email, recognising that they may have composed the email in a state of stress or in the heat of the moment. We can apply the same principles in email communication, as we do with any other interaction. First of all we need to be mindful of our own emotional state or stress levels, and if we're in a difficult place, it may be a bad time to respond or compose a new email. Ask yourself how urgent it really is to write that email, and whether you're likely to be clear about the purpose and what it is you're trying to indicate if you wait until you're in a better frame of mind.

Remember that words on a page miss out on the intonation and body language that we know to be critically important in conveying the right messages when we're talking to people face--to--face. In this respect, it's even more important to compose emails carefully.

Applying our mindfulness skills

This is great opportunity to apply some of the skills that we've been working on in this mindfulness course. First is simply tuning in to our own state of mind and

tensions we may be feeling in the body or in the way we're breathing; secondly pausing to reflect on our own values and our intention; and finally choosing kindness and compassion as our guiding principles. If we're experiencing a tense or stressful mind state, we will be much clearer and communicate more effectively if we take a couple of minutes to pause, centre, and breathe.

Visualise the person who will receive the email and imagine how you could best 'say' what you need to in a respectful, constructive and concise way. Before you hit the send button, pause again and review what you've written in a calm and considerate frame of mind. Write longer emails rather than short, terse ones, and include the normal salutations and preambles, and a proper sign off ; while it might seem 'efficient' to write less, this leaves more to the reader to interpret, or misinterpret! Allow the reader to understand your concerns, so that they are given the opportunity to empathise with you too.

The approach to mindful emailing is well summed up in the Google SIY programme: "Mindful emailing means staying connected to yourself during the email process, as well as staying connected to the fact that you're communicating with another human being."