

# Research reveals workers' worst inbox sins

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Workers obsessed with checking their emails could be damaging their own mental health and that of their colleagues, according to research at London's Kingston University.

Occupational psychologist Dr Emma Russell believes she has identified the seven deadly email sins that can lead to 'negative repercussions' if not handled correctly.

Some of the worst habits include 'ping pong' messages back and forth and 'read receipts', which accompany every missive sent, the study, looking into which email practices stress employees out, found.

"Back in the dial-up era, when going online had a cost implication, most people checked email maybe once a day and often responded to mails as soon as they read them. Now with broadband and 3G, unlimited numbers of messages can be streamed to you via your smartphone at any time of the day or night. However many of us haven't adapted our behaviour to what can seem like a constant stream of mails," Dr Emma Russell, a senior lecturer in occupational psychology at Kingston Business School, explained.

Responding to out of hours emails, for instance, may make an employee look keen but it can also mean workers find it difficult to switch off, according to the study. "This puts pressure on staff to be permanently on call and makes those they are dealing with feel the need to respond," Dr Russell explained. "Some workers became so obsessed by email that they even reported experiencing so-called 'phantom alerts' where they think

their phone has vibrated or beeped with an incoming email when in fact it has not. Others said they felt they needed to physically hold their smartphone when they were not at their desk so that they were in constant email contact."

Email ping pong, where messages are responded to immediately by both sides until a very long chain builds up, are particularly hated by many of those involved.

Dr Russell analysed 28 email users across different companies to see which habits had positive and negative influences on their working lives.

She identified seven habits which can be positive if used in moderation but are likely to have a negative impact if not handled correctly. "This research reminds us that even though we think we are using strategies for dealing with our email at work, many of them can be detrimental to other goals and the people that we work with," Dr Russell said.

Some create a problem for the sender rather than the receiver, she said, as they can lead to them giving out the wrong impression or not remaining in control of what they are doing. For example having email alerts switched on and responding to email immediately can have positive benefits if one wants to show concern to the person who has emailed them. However, it may have negative repercussions in terms of the sender feeling that responding to emails is taking them away from other tasks and impacting on their sense of well-being.

The report was presented at the British Psychological Society's annual conference.

Seven deadly email sins:

1. Ping pong - constant emails back and forth creating long chains

2. Emailing out of hours
3. Emailing while in company
4. Ignoring emails completely
5. Requesting read receipts
6. Responding immediately to an [email](#) alert
7. Automated replies

Provided by Kingston University, London

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