Email Strategies and Tactics: Less is More

By Mitchell Stephenson

Knowledge workers—those whose jobs involve handling or using information—spend a significant amount of time on electronic communication. According to a 2012 McKenzie study quoted in *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, the average knowledge worker spends more than 60 percent of the workweek engaged in electronic communication and internet searching. Almost 30 percent of their time is spent reading and answering email.[1] Given that workers spend this much time communicating electronically, writing effectively is critical to their success.

Here are strategies and tactics to make electronic and email communication as effective as possible:

1. **Question whether writing is the best vehicle for the message.** For difficult conversations, address the recipient in person, by phone, or by video. This helps to avoid miscommunication. An email, or any other form of written communication that does not allow for interaction or a deeper conversation, should serve as a last resort.

2. **Make "Save as Draft" a habit.** Because written communication can easily be misinterpreted, it helps to hit "Save as Draft," instead of "Send," when you complete your email. This is especially true during an emotional situation. Come back a little later and reread what you wrote, then edit as needed. I use this strategy and find that I rarely send the original email after rethinking my communication.

3. **Limit the distribution.** Typically, the more emails I send, the more I receive. This is especially true when many people are copied. Michael Mankins and Eric Garton, the authors of *Time*, *Talent*, *Energy*, recommend never using the "Reply All" button.[2] They argue that when senders type in each recipient's name, they are much more careful about whom to include in the distribution.

4. **Use a "less is more" approach.** Use bold, italics and underlining effectively, but only when needed. Make the "asks" stand out by using colors, bold font or highlighting. Use this approach sparingly and in the most important part of the email. I try to abide by the "scroll-down rule," which is that if the recipient needs to scroll down a page, he or she is less likely to read the email right away. Fitting everything onto one page increases the likelihood of the recipient reading, and responding, faster. Try not to cover multiple subjects in a single note, which may make it too long and difficult to follow.

5. **Think about the purpose.** Is the communication informational, meant to solicit a response or instructional? If it is just informational, tag the subject line as "informational only" so people know no response is needed. If a response is needed, make sure the requested action is clear. Include this information in the subject line, such as "response requested by" and give the date. Make sure that when sending an email, it's not up to the recipient to figure out what should happen next. As a recipient, I find it's always helpful when

people propose a clear action item or next step for me to agree or disagree.

In a summary of his experiments on electricity, Benjamin Franklin wrote, "I have already made this paper too long … not having now time to make it shorter." He was right—it takes time to reduce content and state conclusions concisely. Using the tips above will improve readability, encourage the right follow-ups and reduce confusion.

When it comes to maximizing the time spent on written communications, and making them as effective as possible, remember to keep in mind the mantra: Less is More. ■

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ENDNOTES

1 Newport, Cal. 2016. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World.* New York: Grand Central Publishing.

2 Garton, Eric, and Michael Mankins. 2017. *Time, Talent, Energy: Overcome Organizational Drag and Unleash Your Team's Productive Power.* Boston: Bain and Company.

Get Plugged in–New InsurTech Partnership

The SOA and Plug and Play relationship will allow InsurTech start-ups to validate their technology and modeling processes with actuaries. In turn, SOA members will have an exclusive look inside the world of emerging technologies. These efforts will help with the development of fair and financially sound insurance products to better serve consumers.

The strategic partnership with Plug and Play demonstrates the SOA's commitment to providing its members with dynamic learning experiences, rewarding volunteer opportunities, and collaborative events where they can learn from the experiences and ideas of peers around the world. Through this partnership SOA members and start-ups can share best practices and advance ideas for the benefit of the insurance industry, regulators and the public. The SOA and Plug and Play officially announce this partnership to support an exchange of knowledge between actuaries and start-ups. ■

The Zen Actuary Installment 16

The Challenge of Transitions, Part 2

By Rich Lauria

Author's note: This is the continuation of a series[1] adapted from the book Awake at Work *by Michael Carroll, covering the application of Buddhist teachings to situations encountered in a modern corporate workplace setting. This series addresses challenges frequently encountered by practicing actuaries.*

Over the past year, I have noticed the growing popularity of the following innocuous sequence of poses and breathing cues across a number of yoga classes of various categories:

> From a standing position at the top of the mat, take a large step back with the right foot and place it at about 90 degrees in relation to the front foot, parallel to the short edge of the mat. Raise the arms to a T and bend the front knee to come into Warrior 2. Make sure the torso is centered and there is a long line of energy radiating through the fingertips. To protect the front knee, make sure the bend is tracking toward the pinky-toe side of the front foot. Keep the back leg straight and keep the arch of the back foot lifted. Tuck the tailbone, pull the low belly in, look out over the fingertips of the front hand and breathe.
>
> On an inhale, sweep the left arm up toward the sky while keeping the bend in that front left knee and letting the right arm ease down the back of the right leg, coming into Peaceful Warrior. On the next exhale, bring the torso forward and place the left forearm lightly on the left thigh while turning the ribs and chest toward the sky and sweeping the right arm extended straight up or over the right ear in Side Angle pose. Immediately on the next inhale, come back into Peaceful Warrior; on the next exhale, come back into Side Angle.
>
> Continue alternating between these poses using the breath to guide you, keeping the lower body quiet as you adjust arms and torso in the transitions. After four or five iterations, come back into Warrior 2 for a breath, and on the following inhale, swing the right leg back to meet the left at the top of the mat. Lower the arms on an exhale and come back into a standing position. Take three or four deep breaths, and repeat the sequence on the opposite side.

I have been practicing yoga for over 10 years. Each of the poses described above I can do individually without much difficulty. I have also practiced transitioning between the poses for many years. What makes this sequence unusual and challenging for me are the quick transitions between Peaceful Warrior and Side Angle.

I had developed a "samskara," or mental habit, of getting settled into each pose for at least three breaths before transitioning to the other. When I was first introduced to switching between them on the half breath, I was surprised and dismayed at how difficult it was to keep both my balance and my form. My inner voice (critic) would immediately kick in with, "Hey, Yogi, what's with you! Doing yoga for all these years and you still can't do these poses! Put a speed transition in and you're thrown off!"

> If you want to find out how centered and focused you are, change jobs or, better yet, change careers.

The anger and shame I was experiencing were palpable. I almost fell the first handful of times I did this. I still struggle with it after about a year of working on it and there is always an "Oh no!" that goes off in my head when a teacher cues that quick transition between the two poses.

As highlighted in the previous installment of this series, I am working through a major career transition of my own. Effective Aug. 1, 2019, I was appointed full-time lecturer and associate director of the Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) program in the School of Professional Studies at Columbia University. My last official day in my prior position at Assurant was six days earlier. Talk about a quick transition! I barely finished saying my good-byes to many beloved colleagues when I had to take my talents to Morningside Heights and hit the ground running. I had three classes to prepare for—each a different topic in the ERM program—and slightly more than a month to get everything ready for my students. As I write this on the last day of final exams for this watershed first semester, I humbly realize that this would have been impossible to achieve without the following extenuating circumstances:

- Two of the three courses I was teaching I had already taught before. I had previously authored a successful reconstruction of one and had cocreated the other and fleshed it out in the classroom. The third class I was coteaching with an instructor who had just taught it in the summer, and he was scheduled to lead the first four lectures.
- One course is purely applied case studies. The main preparation is the creation of the case study materials and assignments, some of which can be deferred until later in the semester. Although this is a fair amount of work, my experience teaching the course shortened the preparation time considerably.
- The other courses already had lecture materials created. All I had to do was study the assigned readings and master the slide decks in order to present them effectively. (Or so I thought, as one of the courses required significant revamping of the lectures.)
- Two courses had small class sizes (11 and 12 students). Although this did not materially affect class prep time—preparation is largely a "fixed cost" whether you have one student or 100—it did reduce the amount of grading required. In addition, it provided some flexibility to introduce more class exercises and student presentations.
- I was helped by the enthusiastic engagement and support of the students I had been assigned to teach. They were patient and understanding as I worked through the inevitable hiccups and missteps that occur with such a material transition.

Nevertheless, I was thrown by the change. The quick move into full-time teaching challenged my equilibrium. Classes to prepare for came thick and fast. Switching gears between the different classes became a way of life. Responding to student emails became first, second and third priority. Nonteaching administrative assignments began to emerge, partially due to my associate director role. Student meetings, faculty meetings, admissions decisions, cross-registration approvals, reviewing résumés and interviewing new faculty, monitoring and advising existing faculty—all things I never had to do in my "prior life."

Many of these tasks have turned out to be enjoyable and meaningful, but it frankly took some time to make progress on the learning curve. Thankfully, my boss has been exceptionally patient and understanding of the challenges of transition. In addition, my wife has demonstrated similar virtues as I work through this shift. However, she does occasionally gently ask the rhetorical question, "I thought you were supposed to have more free time teaching …"

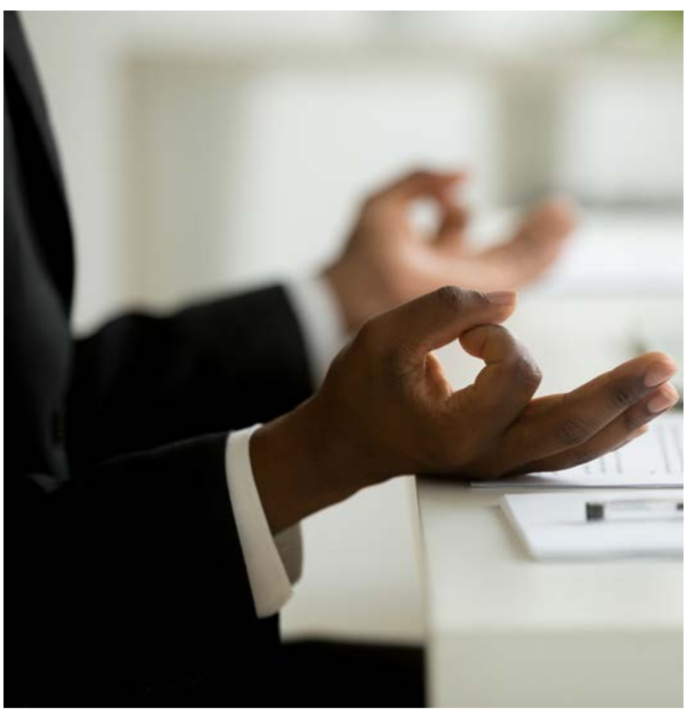
This has definitely challenged my mindfulness practices! If you want to find out how centered and focused you are, change jobs or, better yet, change careers. I have been humbled by how unsettled my mind has been during this time. My initial tendency was to place blame on externals: blame the job, school, commute, students, other faculty, challenging course content—you name it. I looked all around and found plenty of culprits causing my unsettled condition. But over the past few weeks, I began to turn inward for reflection. My meditation practice took on new urgency. I began embracing those challenging yoga poses and transitions, recalling the wisdom of one fellow yoga teacher who stated, "Be grateful for the poses that you cannot or struggle to do, for they provide us with the challenges we need to continue growing our practice."

I have to continually remind myself of that word, "practice." Deep down inside I know I am not and never will be the finished article, but I continue to work diligently to be a better person and professional. And teaching full-time has definitely provided a fantastic new vehicle for continuing that never-ending work. As I contemplate the end of this first semester, I cannot say I'm settled in or in any way "comfortable," but I see more clearly than ever how my mind creates so many obstacles in finding that place of stillness. More important, I realize that many of these disturbances have been there for years and that I have the capability to work on and reduce them. The practices work but sometimes we don't know they do until we have uncomfortable feelings.

How comfortable are you in your current position? Being comfortable is not necessarily a bad thing. I know full well the joys of working on similar types of projects day in and day out. Progressing along such a path, whether it's developing and pricing existing and new products, expanding valuation skills and techniques, researching and implementing new underwriting standards, honing data analysis skills for experience studies and other applications, or as in my case, modeling risks and their interactions across the enterprise and using this information to advise key stakeholders on the company's risk profile, can be very worthwhile endeavors for actuaries. Such practices continue to ensure sound and robust institutions providing quality financial protection programs to the general public on a cost-efficient basis.

However, if you take a step back, you will recall a time when you may not have been so comfortable in what you were doing. The data didn't behave the way it did in the textbook. Certain policy features had to be shoehorned into existing systems. Developing robust assumptions about operational and strategic risks required as much art as science. There was a transition from the "model" or expectation of the work into the reality of what can and needs to be done. Making that adjustment can be very difficult, especially at first.

If you are in that comfort zone today, I invite you to think back to those experiences. What went through your mind? How did you feel when you hit a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to progressing in your work? Did you resist it, try to escape, put it aside temporarily, seek guidance or continue working through the issues? None of these feelings and reactions are "wrong." They are all part of the personal growth experience that comes when we reach our edge—that point where things don't come so easily anymore. I have found in my experience that this is a juicy place to be, loaded with information on where I am psychologically and inviting me to work through the fears and limiting thoughts I've placed on myself. These moments arrive even when I'm not going through a major transition, but the escape button is much easier to reach then.



Transitions—if we're going to engage them with sincerity—require facing up to those challenges and working through them. For actuaries, this may mean navigating everything from a new data warehouse to an upgraded modeling system, to sweeping regulatory revisions, to adapting to a different corporate culture brought about by changes in leadership. Not all transitions are created equal. Some are a bit unsettling to get our feet grounded, while others feel like the drop from the top of a roller-coaster ride, as this following challenging asana transition illustrates.

> From a standing position, bring the feet wider than hip width apart and turn the toes outward. On an exhale, bend the knees, bring the hands to a prayer position at heart center and lower the torso into a yogi squat. Keep the heels on the mat, lift the chest, and press the elbows against the inner thighs. Stay here for a few breaths. Then place the hands directly in front of the feet on the mat. On an inhale, lift the left knee onto the back of the upper left arm. On the next inhale, lift the right knee onto the back of the upper right arm. On an exhale, lean forward onto the hands, engage the pelvic floor and navel and lift the feet from the mat, coming into crow pose. Take a few breaths in this arm balance and then begin to slowly lower the head toward the mat while still in the pose. Place the crown of the head on the mat and begin to shift the hips upward until they are over the head. Further engaging the low belly muscles, extend the legs upward toward the sky, coming into a full tripod headstand.

OK, reality check. I cannot do the above transition, although I can do all three poses described on their own. Going from crow to tripod headstand takes tremendous arm and core strength, as well as superior focus and concentration. If your mind is wandering to your grocery shopping list, do not even think about attempting it. I've had my fair share of bumps and bruises from trying even with a clear mind! The point here is that while some things are difficult to do unto and of themselves (crow and tripod headstand can take years to master individually), transitioning from one to the other is another level or three of difficulty altogether.

Although I think it would be somewhat of an exaggeration to say that my transition to academia has been equivalent to going from an arm balance to a headstand, it has certainly challenged my equilibrium and self-awareness. My commute time is no different, but I now have far fewer options coming to campus in Morningside Heights than I did traveling to the Financial District. Places to eat out are far fewer, and most on-campus dining options are limited to items with grease, fat, salt and sugar. (Ah! To be 20 years old again—when the body can digest virtually anything!)

On the flip side, I now have to go up and down one flight of stairs to use the restroom, which given the amount of water I drink provides me with plenty of built-in exercise and glute work each day. And my spacious office is now a cubicle, offering me further practice in humility. I'm well aware that these are small things, but they are all part of the adjustment as well. Oh, and I forgot, I no longer have a top-flight professional staff making me look good (even more humility practice).

All that being said, I am glad I've made this transition. Not necessarily because I am "happier," per se, but because I have learned a good deal about myself and what brings me satisfaction. And the good news is that I sense this is only the tip of the iceberg. Whether I do this one year or 20, I have gained perspective and insight less attainable on my prior path.

Regardless of where you are in your career, I encourage you to consider ways to find your edge. You do not need to change careers, companies or even departments in your current company. All you need is an open mind and the curiosity to see things in different ways. And be fearless about those seemingly massive obstacles we all run into in our work, whether as company actuaries, consultants, regulators, bankers or even academicians. Begin viewing them as opportunities rather than obstructions, and over time the idea of a major transition will be something less to be feared than explored. Perhaps you will stand on your head, too! ■

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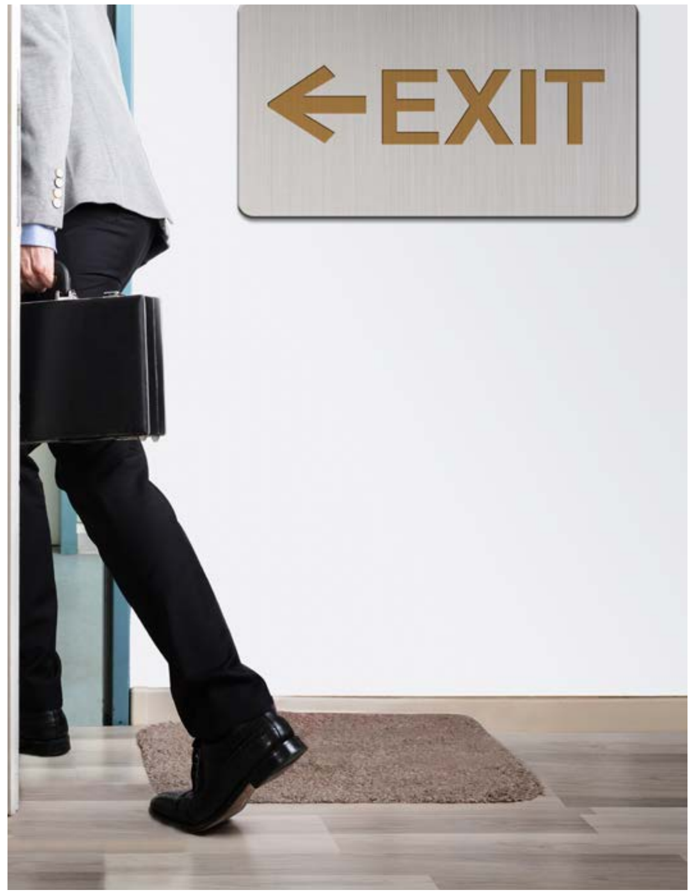
ENDNOTE

1 The first 15 installments in the Zen Actuary series were published in the November 2013 through November 2019 issues of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at *www.SOA.org/ld*.

What Would You Do?

Responses to "Parting Company"

By John West Hadley



In the November 2019 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I presented the following situation faced by an actuarial manager. Here are selected responses and excerpts, edited for space and clarity, followed by the real-life conclusion. (Please note that inclusion of responses should not be taken as an endorsement by either the section council or the Society of Actuaries of the positions presented.) Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to *SteppingStone@JHACareers.com*.

PARTING COMPANY

Felicia is a career ASA who has worked for Raj for several years. Raj enjoys having Felicia on his team and considers her a very good employee. The only issue has been that Raj's boss, the chief actuary, doesn't appear to value her as much as Raj does.

Felicia comes to Raj to turn in her resignation, as she has received an offer from another company in the area. Raj is quick to congratulate her and wish her well, and he asks about the new role with sincere interest. As she describes it, he gets the sense that she is not excited about the move.

If you were Raj, what would you do?

The conventional wisdom is that counteroffers don't generally work out well for either the employee or the company. So I was surprised that most respondents felt an attempt at a "save" was the preferred course of action:

If Raj truly values Felicia, he should ask what the company can do to keep her and explore any options to help her.

I would make an effort to retain Felicia—I would want to retain my strong talent! I would quickly pull together documentation of Felicia's accomplishments, her performance against her peers and examples of her demonstrating core competencies for actuaries. I would then present this evidence to the chief actuary to make a case for a counteroffer. Going forward, I would also consider how I could better advocate for my top performers to the chief actuary to bring my and her views of my team members into closer alignment. It's possible if I had done that proactively, it would have prevented Felicia from pursuing other opportunities in the first place.

I would ask Felicia point-blank what has driven her decision, and if there is anything that would get her to stay. Then I would meet with my boss to discuss the situation. Does Raj actually know that his boss doesn't value Felicia as much, or is he speculating? Are there issues in the organization that the boss needs to be aware of? Felicia may be a bellwether of future retention challenges. I've had multiple conversations like this with employees over my career. Sometimes I've been able to rejigger the job to reengage the person's passion, and sometimes it was just obvious that they would be happier somewhere else. Mostly it hasn't been about money! People want to feel fulfilled and appreciated and they want to work on projects that interest them.

I would:

1. Ask why Felicia decided to leave. Better pay? New challenge? Other reasons?

2. Ask what she seeks in the new role.

3. If that is something I could offer, ask her to give me time to discuss it with senior management for a possible counteroffer.

I would sincerely ask Felicia about her motives—why she decided to leave—and based on her response, is there something I could do to keep her. I would trust her to share as much as she feels comfortable with, but would not press for additional detail. If there was nothing I could do to keep her, I would reiterate my support for her decision, wish her well and encourage her to keep in touch.

This actuary felt Raj had created the problem:

As Felicia's boss, it is important for Raj to highlight her value to his boss. Raj has been very passive: Raj accepts that his boss doesn't seem to value Felicia, and then he never asks Felicia why she is leaving. People want to work where they are valued. I would do some introspection on how my inaction may have contributed.

Meanwhile, this actuary felt it was too late:

I think it is too late to effectively impact the situation. Once a decision to leave a company has been made, it is difficult to make a reconnection. Even if Felicia would decide to stay, it is highly likely she would leave again in the future. The time to influence the decision was months or years ago. Having an honest discussion with staff should be an ongoing event, making sure staff are getting quality projects and working in a healthy environment. At this point, just find out what could have been done differently to help the remaining employees.

This final respondent felt Raj was constrained by what had already happened, but he came fairly close to what really happened:

This really should be "What Should You Have Done?" Had Raj been more proactive about determining the reason for the chief actuary's lack of valuing Felicia's work, and addressed it to either help Felicia increase the value or more clearly communicate her value, the situation may not have come up at all. Or if it had, Raj would have a better feel for whether he should work to try to get Felicia to stay or just let her go.

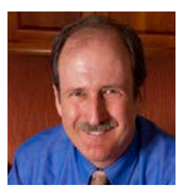
Raj owes it to Felicia to find out if his "sense" that she was not excited to leave is accurate. If she is in fact not excited about the move, he should probe into her motivation and determine, without making any promises, if there is a way to retain her if in fact he values her work.

Assuming Raj prefers to retain Felicia, he then needs to go to the chief actuary and sell the value of doing so. He would need to have the cost required to keep her, and the ability to articulate the value of doing so. Ultimately the decision lies with the chief actuary, and Raj has an obligation to carry the decision out, which is why he cannot make any promise—but he can ask. Of course, if she has no interest in staying, about the only thing Raj can do is congratulate her and seek her help in making the transition as smooth as possible, and perhaps also seek to understand what changes, if any, he needs to make in order to not lose good employees in the future.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

Raj closed his office door for privacy and observed to Felicia that she didn't seem excited about the move. They talked for two hours. She told Raj how much she enjoyed working for him but that she had concerns about her future at the company and she yearned to be a manager. She wasn't unhappy about her compensation, but she felt that she wasn't going to get that opportunity.

Raj went to the chief actuary, advocated on Felicia's behalf and got approval to promote her to a manager role. He presented that to her along with immediate supervisory responsibility for the department's technical staff. Felicia accepted, and she continued to be one of Raj's star employees. Years later, after both had moved on to other companies, Felicia and Raj continued to be friends, and she told him she considered him her best boss. ■



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