

Crabby welcomes you back after your lengthy leave

Applies to: Microsoft Outlook 2010, Outlook 2007, Outlook 2003, Outlook 2002

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Crabby Office Lady

Taking a leave of absence from work can be a great way to recharge your batteries and get a fresh outlook on both life and your work. Before you go, make sure you're prepared.

You've decided to take some time off work — for maternity or paternity leave, a sabbatical, an illness (yours or when you're acting as a caretaker), or just for a break from the rat race.

But unless you have a clear plan for how to get back into the swing of things once you return, you may find that your time away was more trouble than it was worth. I mean, can you imagine the e-mail messages, tasks, meeting requests, and unfinished business that will await you? But don't panic; a little preparation can go a long way.

In this column, I'm going to go over three main things to think about:

1. How to prepare before you leave.
2. How plugged in you want to be during your time away.
3. How to ease back into things once you've returned.

Before you leave

Of the three main talking points in this column, I think that ensuring you have taken steps to plan ahead before you go on leave is the most critical.

- **Find out what your company's policies are regarding an extended leave**

What is your company's return-to-work philosophy? How will your benefits and pay be impacted? Do you need to set an unalterable start and end date? Does your company even provide short term leave options? These are great things to know about before you even consider taking a leave of absence. And because certain circumstances may prevent you from finding out all of this information quickly, these are good things to know about a company even before you start working for it.

So before you start planning your exit strategy, make sure you know all the rules and regulations and perhaps schedule some time with your human resources representative. These folks are experts at this sort of thing and should have some great ideas about how to prepare for your leave.

- **Decide what needs to be delegated immediately and what can wait**

Of course, how you handle delegation depends on what sort of work you do and how long you'll be gone. If you're an administrative or personal assistant, or have a job where you report to just one person, perhaps your boss can take care of certain duties herself or, if she is averse/allergic to that, maybe you can ask another administrative assistant to help out.

If you work as part of a team, you may need to do some delegating to a variety of other people. Managers, if they're worth their salt (and salary), should be able to help you with these decisions, but don't just toss it all on their shoulders. Being away can put a strain on your coworkers as well as your manager, so come up with a game plan that will spread the love around a bit.

[Delegate Access: Let someone else mind your busyness \(Training course\)](#)

[About delegate access](#)

[How Crabby learned to delegate \(and lead a more normal life\)](#)

- **Get that house in order**

If you're a Type A personality, there's nothing like the feeling you get when checking items off a to-do list. If you're not a Type A, perhaps you have never experienced that feeling or are maybe even muttering to yourself, "List? What list?"

Either way, whatever "type" you are, you are now the type who's going to take an extended leave from work, so consider putting yourself into high gear to wrap up whatever projects, tasks, or to-do items you still have hanging around. If you don't, they'll just be waiting there for you when you return. And, like the fruit and dairy products in the fridge that you forgot to toss out before going on vacation, they may have bloated, created friends, or gone bad by the time you return.

[Demo: Manage your tasks easily with Outlook](#)

- **Set your out-of-office message**

If you're using Outlook with Exchange Server, you can make use of a handy feature called the Out of Office Assistant. This feature lets you create a reply message to e-mail sent to you while you're away. You can leave as little or as much information as you want. But since you are going to be gone for a while, I suggest offering your senders alternatives, such as who they can talk to in your absence. As well, you can also set up specific rules about how to file incoming messages, who should receive your reply message, how often, etc.

[Automatically reply to messages with the Out of Office Assistant](#)

[Create a rule with Out of Office Assistant](#)

Now, the Out of Office Assistant won't appear in the Outlook **Tools** menu if you're not using Outlook with Exchange. There are, however, other ways to prepare an automated reply.

- [Manage messages by using rules](#)
- [Automatically reply to incoming messages with a POP3 or IMAP e-mail account](#)

- **Teach your Inbox to take care of itself while you're away**

I use a lot of rules in Outlook and maybe you do too. I have rules to move messages from one person into this folder, another person into that folder, and certain items get sent right to the Junk Mail folder (oh, how I love that rule like it was my child).

Before you walk out the door, you may want to recheck how you've set up your rules and adjust accordingly. For example, you want to set up rules so that e-mail messages from certain customers are rerouted to the people you've pawned them off on instead of automatically having them shoveled into a deep Inbox folder that won't be touched until you return. You can do this from within the Out of Office Assistant box, or you can set up a specific rule as well.

[Manage messages by using rules](#)

- **Notify your customers**

Sure, you can do this with an out-of-office message, and while I'm not a salesperson, that doesn't strike me as the kindest/most professional way to tell someone that they'll be dealing with someone completely different now. Send your customers a note, an e-mail, or call them to let them know that you'll be gone for a while, and let them know who they'll be working with in your company.

- **Set up child care NOW**

If you're about to go on maternity or paternity leave, chances are you're not going to want to want to be starting the child care research while you're at home recovering from giving birth, dealing with jet lag from an overseas adoption, totally sleep deprived, or all of the above. So try and get ahead and start on that now.

While you're gone

Good for you; you've taken the above steps to ensure that you won't return to an out-of-control Inbox, overdue projects, resentful coworkers, or all of the above. Now you need to decide if you're going to have any communication with work at all while you're away. In some instances, you may not have a choice: Once you're on leave, you're gone, and they don't want to hear from you. However, there may be circumstance when you'll be required to check in periodically.

- **Small business owner: Can you truly be completely G-O-N-E?**

Chances are, if you own — and normally run — a small business, you won't be able to completely disconnect. If I were you (and you know I'm not since I neither own nor run Microsoft, and it certainly isn't a small business), I'd set up some ground rules with your employees, not to mention yourself.

Maybe you'll decide to check mail once a week, or maybe you'll have all or part of your mail forwarded to a separate, personal account. However you want to work it, remember that you're on leave for a reason; if you're logged on every day and just doing the work you'd normally do, that's called telecommuting.

[Automatically forward my messages to another e-mail account](#)
[About managing your Inbox automatically while out of the office](#)

- **Take the child care situation for a spin**

Even if you've got child care all lined up — whether it be in a daycare/preschool, with a nanny, or with a family member — now's the time to give it several trial runs. It's better to know if something truly won't work now, while you're still on leave, than to have to deal with it when you're back to work. (If it's any consolation, I learned this the hard way...)

When you return

Okay, now you're back and about to jump into the fray again. It may be a bit of a struggle to figure out just where to start and how to get into that drone frame of mind again. And while I have some tips to offer below, I don't have a one-size-fits-all solution or template to make this transition easier on you. I recognize that each person and each job is different, so consider these tips to be broad, and then take 'em or leave 'em.

- **Don't expect to pick up right where you left off**

You've been dealing with a new baby, a sick parent, a sick self, or perhaps a personal issue or catastrophe. So take it easy on yourself, Sparky. Most managers and coworkers won't expect you to be at the top of your game right away. So try not to get too stressed out your first week back. Give yourself some time to catch up on what's been going on. Talk to people, talk to your customers, read past issues of the company newsletters, and perhaps schedule some time for you and your manager to sit down and have a one-on-one.

- **Turn off your out-of-office message**

Yes, this goes without saying, but perhaps I should edit that a bit: Maybe you should *change* your OOF instead of completely turning it off, thereby opening the floodgates to in-pouring mail. Keep it on, change it to say that you've just returned from an extended leave and will get back to the sender shortly. People can be a lot more understanding than we give them credit for....

[Turn an Out of Office Assistant rule on or off](#)

- **Let your coworkers know you're back**

Again, this goes without saying, but at the risk of sounding harsh (who, me?), life in the office has marched on without you, and it's possible that your coworkers have gotten along just fine in your absence. And while this is a good thing for business, it may make you feel left out. Stop by others' offices, send out a broad e-mail, or gather the people with whom you work most closely in a meeting to try and catch up on what's been going on in your sector of the business.

"Speak the truth, but leave immediately after." — Slovenian Proverb

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Was this information helpful?** tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.