Crabby's get-away-from-it-all checklist

The Crabby Office Lady

You may be fanatical about every single detail surrounding your vacation plans. Consider spending a little time making sure everything is wrapped up at the office too. It can make for a smooth getaway ... and return.

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Your bags are packed, you're ready to go...

Or so you think. Did you turn off the oven? Did you tell the post office to hold your mail? Did you set your OOF?

If you said "yes" to the first two but are scratching your head about that last one, this column is for you. When you're preparing to go on vacation, it's best to take care of some things at the office before you leave. That way, when you return, you won't have an angry pile of e-mail messages in your inbox or a line of people waiting outside your office.

Tell everyone you are G-O-N-E

Maybe you're the type who mercilessly pesters everyone with your vacation plans weeks before you actually leave. Then you just assume that everyone remembers you'll be gone for two weeks and won't send you e-mail.

Wrong. Shocking as it may seem, you are not the center of your coworkers' universe, and it's entirely possible that they will forget you're gone and send you mail. (I know a couple of folks who will do it on purpose.) They may even expect you to respond. Wouldn't it be great if your mail program — say, Outlook — could send the automatic response that you so craftily created before you left town?

Using Outlook with Exchange Server If your company is running Outlook with Exchange Server, you can use 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. It also lets you set up specific rules about who to reply to, how often, even how to file the messages.

- Automatically reply to messages with the Out of Office Assistant

Using Outlook without Exchange Server If the Out of Office Assistant doesn't appear in the **Tools** menu, you're not using Outlook with Exchange. (Read that sentence again, please: no Exchange, no Assistant.) You are not, however, left out in the cold.

- Manage messages by using rules
- Automatically reply to incoming messages with a POP3 or IMAP e-mail account

Whether you use the Out of Office Assistant or set up a rule, when you create your message (affectionately known as your OOF, for "Out of Office") consider mentioning that you're gone, noting when you'll be returning, and giving the sender another person to contact in your absence. If you want to give an alternative e-mail address or number that could be used to track you down, that's up to you. But realize, then, that you're fair game for work-related calls just when you're having the best golf game of your life.

Block off your Outlook calendar

If you use Outlook with Exchange at work, you'll want to mark your Outlook calendar to reflect that you are out of the office. That way, if someone tries to schedule you for yet another meeting, they'll see that you're gone and not available to sit and yammer on about upcoming reviews, this year's fiscal results, or the boss's pet project that just won't die.

Another thing you and your coworkers may want to decide as a team, is whether or not people going on vacation should send meeting requests to the rest of the team so that a reminder will pop up to show your coworkers that you're gone. My team does this — and we use all day events so that it doesn't appear within the calendar hours — but be sure that you set the **Show as** box as **Free** or the time that you'll be out will show up as busy on all of your teammates' calendars (as if they didn't have enough to be irritated about, you gallivanting around the globe and whatnot).

Decline standing meetings

If you've got recurring meetings that will happen while you're out, the courteous thing to do is decline those meetings. It's also nice to let the organizers know why so that it doesn't seem as if you're gratuitously shooting back a "No! I'm not coming!" If you're the organizer, send out a cancellation so that 25 people don't show up in a conference room and sit there, blandly waiting for someone to say something — or talking about you.

Check in files

When you work in a team environment, chances are you participate in a lot of checking in and out of files. Maybe you do it from a SharePoint site or FrontPage Web site, from Visual Source Safe, or from some other program that offers version control. If you leave without checking in your file, what happens to the rest of your team? What if you win the lottery and never come back to work? What if you're hit by a truck and never come back to work? What if your computer crashes and all the work you did after you last checked out the file is lost and your boss decides you're never coming back to work?

Don't be so selfish. Do yourself, your team, and your work a favor: Make sure all your files are checked in before you head out.

Reassign outstanding projects

In other words, palm off your work on someone else. Yes, it's sneaky but hey, someone has to do the work or it just won't get done, right? Reports won't get sent out, the site will go stale, or your fleet of trucks will be stranded somewhere without a gas pump in sight. In other words, deadlines will go by, and I know you don't want to be the cause of all that suffering.

There are a couple of ways to do this to unsuspecting coworkers. You can 1) reassign your Outlook tasks, or 2) send e-mail messages with follow-up flags that will turn red while you're still on vacation. (Both of these are diabolical, yes; that's what I like about them.)

- Create and track assigned tasks
- Reclaim ownership of a declined task (if someone has the nerve to decline!)
- Add or remove a flag for follow up

Get out of Dodge

A few more things I thought of:

- Don't leave your cell phone number on your whiteboard.
- Change your outgoing voicemail message.
- Turn off your computer.
- Check the oil in the car.
- Make sure your airline hasn't gone out of business.
- Turn off the lights.
- Don't forget to write.

"Vacation is what you take when you can't take what you've been taking any longer." — Cowardly Lion (Wizard of Oz)

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 **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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