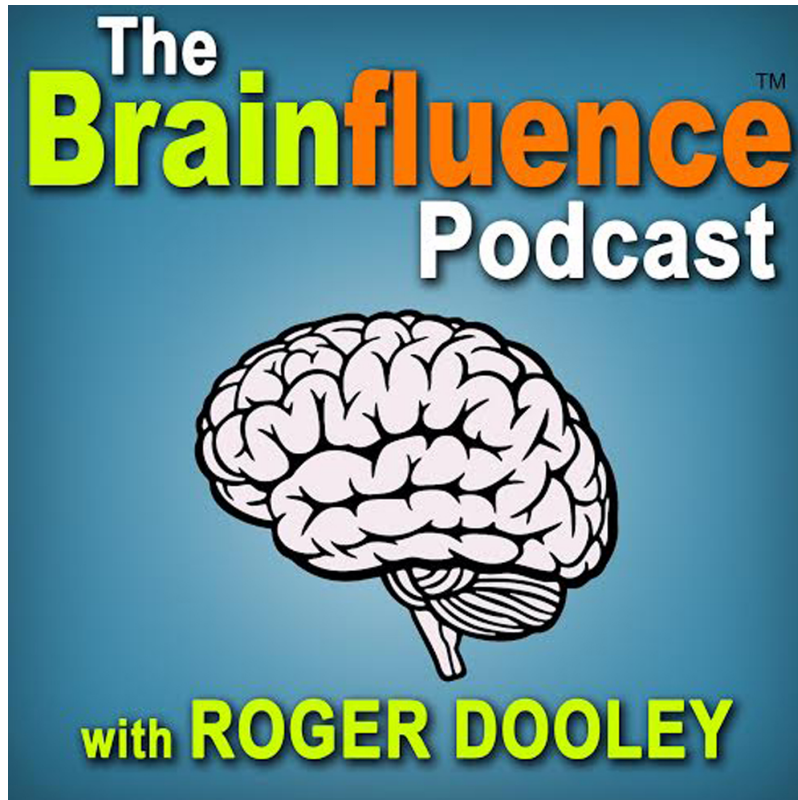


The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger: Welcome to The Brainfluence Podcast, I'm Roger Dooley. Our guest this week is Jocelyn Gleib, and she's going to help us solve one of our most vexing problems, particularly a productivity problem that besets us all. Jocelyn is a writer who said she's obsessed with finding creativity and meaning in our daily work. Her past books include *Manage Your Day-to-Day*, *Maximize Your Potential*, and *Make Your Mark*. Her newest book is *Unsubscribe: How to kill email anxiety, avoid distractions, and get real work done*. Jocelyn, welcome to the show.

Jocelyn: Thanks for having me, Roger.

Roger: Jocelyn, I love to begin your book with a deep dive into the psychology and even maybe a little bit the neurochemistry of email. All too often, the advice you get from a productivity experts for curtailing your email use ignores the fact that regardless of whatever app you use to check your email and manage your email, email can actually be deeply addictive, and I love the subtitle for the first section, "Why email makes us crazy." Why does email make us crazy, and what are the effects of email on our brain?"

Jocelyn: Well, they're sort of ... I talked about a number of concepts in the beginning of the book, but maybe I'll share two that I think are kind of the most important. The first is this idea of random rewards that really drives addiction. If you think about it, in many ways, your email is essentially like a slot machine. It operates sort of similarly addictively. If you think about you kind of maybe reach to pull the lever to check your email, most of

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

the time you get something not that great. You kind of lose in the same way you do with the slot machine. Maybe you get an email from your boss, asking you to do something you don't particularly feel like doing, or you get an email from an angry customer, something of that nature, something you're particularly excited about.

But every once in a while you pull that lever, and you get something great. Maybe it's an invitation to speak at a TEDx Conference, or it's an email from a long lost friend that you've lost touch with. It's really those random rewards that come unexpectedly that kind of activate the sort of primal seeking mechanism in our brains, and that kind of makes us want to sort of keep pulling that lever and keep checking our email, again, and again, and again, even when we have better things to do. I think that idea of random rewards, email is kind of a slot machine, is one really key concept to understand.

Roger: Jocelyn, one thing I was going to say. My friend Nir Eyal, who is a past guest on this show, developed his hook model for creating habit-forming products, and particularly habit-forming electronic apps. In that model, these random rewards are a key element. It's why we keep going back to Facebook or Instagram, and seeing if people liked our stuff or shared or commented, because it was predictable, it wouldn't really be addictive. If the same 10 people like everything you posted on Facebook, you get bored with it pretty quickly, but it's the randomness of, "Gee, nobody like that one," and then, "Whoa, hey! Lots of people like that one." that really keeps us interested and coming back, and email is exactly that way.

You're right. Most of the time you check your email, and it's a bunch of newsletters that you don't remember subscribing to, or ads from companies that you did business with a couple of years ago, and not sure why're you're still getting their stuff.

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

Once in a while, it's that, "Hey, will you like to do a keynote in Barcelona?" It's like, "Yes, okay. Now, this sounds good." It keeps you coming back, and checking it with an unreasonable frequency.

Jocelyn: Yeah. Obviously I should say of course email is so old that it wasn't designed with that intention. As you note, Nir and kind of other folks out on the west coast have been thinking more deeply about how these things impact our behavior and starting conversations, of course within Silicon Valley and beyond about how some of that can be used with new technologies that are being made. Then I think even more interestingly now you're seeing a bit of push back on that. These folks like Tristan Harris who's kind of leading a sort of movement kind of forum, almost behavior design ethics, kind of pushing back on that saying that we have to start being a little bit more responsible about how we design these tech products, because we know that we can make them very addictive. I think it's interesting that, that dialog is kind of starting to come full circle a little bit.

Roger: Well, just because you can push a button doesn't mean you should push that button. If you actually hear Nir speak at a conference, one of the things he always emphasizes using these tools in a very ethical and appropriate fashion, because I mean there are certainly a million tools in the persuader's toolbox that can be used either. They can be used for good or for evil. Anyway, you're about to mention the second thing.

Jocelyn: Yeah. I think the second concept is this idea of completion bias, again, kind of wired into our brain chemistry. The brain loves to experience completion, right? When you feel a sense or recognize that you completed something, your brain releases dopamine, and it makes you feel good. It makes you want to repeat that behavior again and again. The interesting kind of byproduct of that is that it really makes us predisposed to focus

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

on quick easy to finish tasks, as opposed to long-term tasks that can be a bit more challenging, which is hard to feel that completion sort of on regular basis. Then we kind of take that concept and you think about it with regard to email. Of course Inbox Zero is sort of the ultimate completion of email that we're all kind of always striving to get to and have this sort of strange hunger for that maybe we don't quite understand. But if you think about, even as you're pushing towards Inbox Zero, you even get this little mini hits of completion every time you tick off another unread message and kind of lower that count.

I think again, not intentionally, but email really feeds into that idea of completion bias, and so it really gives us this feeling of productivity, even when perhaps what we're actually accomplishing with those emails, and maybe not the highest priority task that we should really be working on.

Roger: That's really good point because just about everybody thinks that Inbox Zero is good. Although a lot of us aren't there, myself included. I've been there multiple times, but I tend not to stay there for too long. Nevertheless, we treat it as an important goal, but I think that there's an issue with that too, because, as you say, you can end up making this your priority where the things that keeps me from being an Inbox Zero typically are these sort of things you're not totally sure about what to do with. Clearly, if you have something to deal with that you need to get done, that you take care of, or if it's irrelevant or unimportant, you can delete it. A very quick task, you can just click reply and you're done.

But there's a lot of stuff that sort of falls into this category that you're not really sure what to do with. It's some kind of a request that if you had time maybe you'd help out with, but it's not really too relevant to what you're trying to accomplish, and so you sort of let it sit occasionally. That person may raise to

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

the top and increase the priority in some way by saying, "Hey, this is really important. You're gonna have a problem if this doesn't happen." You say, "Oh yeah, that is important." and you do it, but a lot of the stuff just sort of settles into this sludge in the bottom of your inbox that eventually can be deleted, or because today's email tools are so powerful, it really doesn't matter.

Google's search is so powerful that before, a key part of dealing with your email was keeping it organized because then you can find anything, but Gmail and its Google App version let you find anything really quickly, so there's not that much of a benefit from having nothing there. But I think that when you go from inbox, you end up saying, "Okay. Well, I'm gonna have to deal with these things now." Well, I don't know if you've ever tried the email game. I can't remember the company that makes this, but actually turns it into a game where you ... It'll give you 50 emails to clear. It'll time you and so on, and actually gamifies the process, which if your objective is to get Inbox Zero is actually kind of a fun way of doing it. At the time you're playing this email game, you could be writing your next book, preparing for that important speech or whatever.

Jocelyn: Precisely. Yeah, I'm familiar with that app, and I think it's a really novel idea, but at the same time, I'm kind of maybe sort of against it and kind of on the other end of the spectrum, because I think that we really do need to let go of this obsession with Inbox Zero. Just to provide a little perspective even on the term itself, it was essentially created by Merlin Mann in March of 2007 I believe. He actually kind of coined the term Inbox Zero. Interestingly, a really big thing for the world of tech and for the world of email ultimately happened in June of 2007, a couple of months later, which was the introduction of the iPhone. Literally, months after the kind of concept of Inbox Zero was invented, we basically had smart phones and the explosion of mobile, which

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

meant that all of a sudden you could never leave work at the office, and you could never leave your email at the office.

The ripple effects of that really led to a kind of always on, 24/7. Almost anyone who has access to the internet has access to you. If I say, "You know, I wanna get in touch with Roger." If I'm a resourceful person, I'm sure I can find our email address and I can show up in your inbox uninvited. I think the way that our inboxes look now is quite different. As you sort of commented, there's a lot of sort of flotsam and jetsam flowing in. I was just reading a story that was covered in the Harvard Business Review. It was about kind of senior managers, people at sort of manager director level. The study was indicating that they spent essentially about half a day a week, responding to email messages that were irrelevant or unimportant, just because of the sheer volume of the amount of those messages that were showing up in their inboxes. One would presume just a sort of commitment to feeling like you have to respond to all of those messages.

I think that, that obsession with responding to everything with Inbox Zero is really, really dangerous. If you think about that, you think about four hours a week, what that adds up to. I think in an article I just wrote, I think I did the math. It's like you could spend five weeks a year potentially responding to emails that are more or less irrelevant to the work that you're doing. I think it's really reaching a critical mass, and so I think we have to take a new perspective. A lot of what I talk about in the book is not just email, but really zooming out from email, asking readers to really get clear on what their professional goals are, what their career goals are, what their work goals are, and very clearly articulating them, maybe even posting them on a wall next to your desk.

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

You always kind of are very clear about the work that is meaningful to you, the stuff that you do want to accomplish, and kind of using that as a touch stone as you're thinking about your email, as you're thinking, as you say, of all these message, you're kind of, "Should I respond to this? Should I not respond to it? Is it important? Is it not?" I think we all have to kind of think about, almost do an email audit and think about what is that email that's really causing a lot of noise in my inbox, and what am I going to do about it? I'm only going to accept speaking engagements that meet X criteria. I'm only going to respond to emails on the weekdays, et cetera.

Roger: Right. I think that's probably sort of a subset of an overall advice for planning your work and setting your priorities that too often whether it's meeting that we attend or other activities that we're involved in, we end up filling up our day with stuff that really is not relevant to our key goals, whatever that goal may be, or whatever those important goals are. Going back to 7 Habits of Highly Effective People where it's saying, "Okay, put those big boulders in your schedule first, and then let everything else to flow around them." That's kind of the same sort of concept. You mentioned a few other psychological principles there. What about negativity bias?

Jocelyn: Yeah. That's a really interesting one. It really changed the whole way that I thought about email and compose email. Daniel Goleman, who I'm sure you know, is the father of this idea, the emotional intelligence, took a look at the way that people has used email. He discovered essentially that we have a kind of inherent negativity bias. What that means is that essentially sort of between the writing of the email and the receiving of the email, every email kind of gets downgraded a few positivity notches. When I write you an email, I felt positively about it. When you read it and receive it, you probably feel kind of neutral about it. If I feel neutral about it

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

when I write it, when you receive it, you probably feel negatively about the email.

The reason that happens, which Goleman describes, is really sort of a lack of social feedback in the email process. Normally, when you and I are communicating right now, we're talking so you can hear my vocal ton. That offers some information. That kind of shapes how you interpret my intent. Of course in person, you have hand gestures and facial expressions. All of that input tends to shape how we perceive the messages that we're getting from people. But with email, all of that kind of social feedback is absent. People are sort of tended to compose emails as if people did have that feedback, and so that was really causing some problems and leads of course to sort of email flame wars that we all seem to accidentally find ourselves in every once in a while.

Roger: Right. I think it's a characteristic of a lot of online communication. I've been an administrator and moderator and organizer of online communities for years, and you find the exact same thing happening, where somebody says something in an online post, and just like email, there is no additional information to go with it, other than the words on the screen, and the next person misinterprets it. What was meant to be humorous comes across as hostile, or what was meant to be neutral comes across as disapproving. Then you're off to the races in terms of a flame war, or some kind of misunderstanding and miscommunication. With email, hopefully you're not quite as volatile as you see happening in social media or in some online communities, but I think that you still have that same ability to misinterpret what the other person is saying. It's interesting that that tends to skew negative. I mean it'd be nice if we tended to put a positive spin in everything we heard, but that's not what the research shows.

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

Jocelyn: Yeah, it certainly would. I would say I think what it means is that we kind of need to upgrade our empathy and our enthusiasm when we're writing emails. Don't worry about kind of seeming overly cheery or overly positive, because most likely that person is going to interpret it in a slightly more mild manner than you expect.

Roger: Another principle that probably most of the folks in our audience will be familiar with is the idea of reciprocity or reciprocation. That's one of the Cialdini original six, now seven, principles. Why don't you explain how that fits into our for getting lost in email?

Jocelyn: Yeah. Well, one of the things when I was kind of researching for the book, I was thinking about is why do we have such guilt about getting back to people. Why do we really feel this obligation to respond to every single email and kind of anxious or guilty if we can't do it? That kind of led me to really thinking about the rule of reciprocity, which of course certain basic idea that you want to reciprocate a positive action with another positive action. One of the studies that I end up citing in the book is one that was done way back in the '70s by this research called Philip Coons.

What he did was he essentially looked up about ... He wanted to sort of test the rule of reciprocity, and so he basically picked up a phone book. He found 600 people, and he mailed holiday greeting cards to them. They were all kind of hand written, and they have a picture of him and his family. He wanted to see what effect the rule of reciprocity would have. He mailed out the 600 cards, and he ended up getting over 200 responses back from people, so from people who he'd never ever met. It's an interesting example of the rule of reciprocity, really being born out, and then he continued to actually receive holiday cards

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

from those perfect strangers for the next 10 or even 15 years for some of them.

I think the kind of lesson there, that's obviously .. We're talking about letters, the tangible world, but I think it really demonstrates that feeling that we get with email. Of course all of us are constantly responding to strangers who show up in our inbox and feeling obligated to respond to them. How do we end up dealing with that. One of the almost I guess kind of metaphors that I like to use, kind of inspired by that study, is thinking about your inbox. Many of us get hundreds of messages a day, 200 messages, 300 messages, and thinking about what would your attitude be if every one of those actually were a physical letter. Let's say every day you get 200 letters stacked up on your desk, what type of strategy or approach are you going to take to respond to those letters?

Of course I think it'll be quite different from email. For some reasons, you get 200, 300 emails a day, we somehow feel like that's a reasonable amount of messages to respond to. But if you kind of translate it to physical letters, you start to think, "Well, that's crazy." and you would start developing some templated responses, and maybe having your assistant respond to some of them, deciding not to respond to any of them, only picking the most important ones, the most relevant ones, the most interesting ones to really devote your time and attention too. I think we kind of need to take that same attitude and translate it to our inboxes at this point.

Roger: It's kind of interesting, about reciprocity, that the mere communication would have that effect, because typically in sort of the classic mode, you are doing a favor for somebody that even a very small one that generates that feeling of reciprocity. But here, I certainly feel the sentiment that you describe when I get an email from some well-meaning person who maybe has a

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

request, and excluding folks like the sales folks who clearly have no clue as to what I even do, but are trying to pitch me something. Those I can delete with no emotion at all. You get somebody who want something from you, and you do feel bad if you don't reply or you reply in a very short way, declining any assistance. That emotion for sure exist. If it's one a day, it's not a problem, but obviously we get far more than one of those a day.

Jocelyn: Yeah. I think that you have to start really strategic about it. I myself use Gmail, so I use a lot of ... I kind of every couple of month try to take stock of the types of inquiries that I'm getting very frequently, the ones that are starting to really eat into my time, and then kind of make sure that I have canned responses for the one that I'm getting the most frequently, whether it's, okay, request for interview, or somebody wants some type of query advice or speaking engagement. Just have those templates on hand, because that kind of allows you to sort of feed that urge to reciprocate, but without doing in a way that's going to really eat into your time.

In many ways, if you have kind of templated responses available, it actually allows you to provide a more thoughtful response than if you were just doing it on the fly. I don't think you need to feel bad about doing it. I think you just need to sort of be strategic about it.

Roger: Right. Yeah, I totally agree. I too use Gmail actually, the Google apps version of it, and used templated responses. I found that it's been a huge time saver for one, simply because I find I was typing a lot of stuff over and over again, even for simple things like, "Okay, I wanna send you a copy of a book. Where does it go to?" After typing my address a thousand times, and I said, "Gee, I can make this a canned response. I'll do it with two clicks, instead of a couple hundred keystrokes." But as you say

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

too, you can respond to people that normally you couldn't really justify a detailed individual response, but you can actually give them some real value if you sit down once, create a thoughtful canned response, then reply with that, maybe customize a tiny bit as appropriate, and you're actually delivering a far better value to the person than you would have if you would have just simply respond without that.

For anybody who's using Gmail, that to me is one of the huge productivity add-ons that you can use canned response. I think it was part of Google Labs. I'm not sure if it's a feature now or not.

Jocelyn: Yeah, I think so. There is actually ... If you don't use Gmail, there's a product called Text Expander that does similar things and quite a few more things that's extremely useful. You can use it on desktop, and as well as on mobile, to do kind of the same thing where you just sort of create little keyboard shortcuts and they pull up snippets or text or full email. That's a good alternative for people who don't use Gmail potentially.

Roger: Right. We've sort of transitioned from the psychological aspects of why email is so problematic for us all, and start talking about the solutions. What are some other solutions that we can use?

Jocelyn: In terms of kind of email overwhelms specifically?

Roger: Yeah, what are some of the tools? We've gotten down in the weeds there a little bit with canned responses, but in terms of sort of getting our email under control, and keeping its balance with the stuff that we're supposed to be doing that's really important. What are some approaches we can take?

Jocelyn: Yeah. I think the most important one and most difficult is to sort of start time boxing your email routine, rather than relying on kind of notifications and constantly dipping into and out of your

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

email to take a batched approach to processing your email where you designated two, three, or even four times a day to focus 100% on your email, and then attempt to focus 100% on other tasks outside of this sort of designated windows. I say that of course there's tons of anecdotal evidence that indicates this is sort of what productive people do, but there's also been actual research studies that have been done and shown that essentially people who take batched approach to processing their email are more productive. They're happier and they're less stressed, because there is actually ... This probably won't come as any surprise to your listeners, but there is a correlation between how frequently you check your email and how stressed out you are, essentially. The more you check your email, the more stressed you are, typically.

Roger: Another kind of negativity bias there too I guess.

Jocelyn: Yes, there's many. I think time boxing your email routine is a big one. I also think for some people, they say, "Oh, that's just unrealistic for me. I have to respond to my boss really quickly, or maybe I'll get fired, that type of thing." Again, then I think you just need to use different strategies. For instance, if you use Apple Mail in your phone, you can set up something like VIP notifications where you say, "Okay, I need ..." You pick three, four, or five people who are your VIPs. Then those emails just get bubbled up, so you can feel kind of comfortable ignoring your email, because you'll know everything you're ignoring is none urgent.

There's another kind of quick trick that I really like to use for emails, I think is to kind of send quick expectation setting replies. I think often we get these emails from people, and you can tell that the sender feels a lot of urgency, and there's a task they want you to do, but they're also completely unaware of your schedule, the fact that you're on a deadline for something

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

at four p.m. or something like that. Rather than ... I think a lot of times then we feel like, "Oh, I have to write this big complicated response, and it feels sort of annoying or weighty, or you just kind of pretend it's not there and ignore, but feel kind of anxious about it.

Rather than doing either of those things, it's kind of making a habit of sending quick expectation setting replies to people where you just provide some context for them about where you will get to their request. You could just say, "Hey, you know what? I'm stuck in meetings all day. I got your email, I understand it's important. I'm gonna get to it first thing tomorrow morning." Whatever the context is, that allows you to kind of retake control of your schedule by kind of presenting the context to that person who maybe feels this sort of undue urgency for that request.

Roger: Something that you mentioned is, and this sort of shows that the strategy that I'm using is probably not that smart, that is the keeping an email app open or a browser tab open in your email actually reduces your productivity when you're engage in other work. I tend to do that. Much like your sort of prioritization thing, I've got a hierarchy set up in my Gmail app that certain kinds of message are flagged as important, and then that will show up as a notification in my browser tab for example. It's sort of one way of not getting distracted by email, but really some research shows that just having that email open reduces your productivity, even if you're not there checking it. Why is that?

Jocelyn: Yeah, it's kind of right. It's the slight attentional drain on your cognitive resources. I think part of that is ... We talked earlier about completion bias, our love of completing tasks, and the flip side of that is attentional residue, this kind of nagging sensation that we get from trying to pull our attention away from a task that we haven't finished. I think if there's any task that's kind of

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

magnet for this idea, the attentional residue, it's email, the sort of always unfinished task so to speak. When we are getting those persistent kind of notifications popping up, or you just have it kind of minimized on your screen, you're bringing this kind of knowing that it's there and kind of still devoting a certain amount of energy to kind monitoring it and thinking about it.

I think it's best to kind of recommend, if you can, quarantining your email on a separate screen. Whether it's a second monitor or maybe only checking your email on your iPad, or maybe only checking your email on your smart phone, trying to give it its own separate space, particularly so that whatever you want to be focused on center stage, let's say on your desktop computer, is always kind of going to be there and be top of mind. There are studies showing that the clearer your primary work screen is, the more serene and focused your mind can be. I think trying to give your email a separate place.

That also plays into the idea of physically shifting with tasks shifting. You do certain tasks in certain physical locations, and that's very effective for activating your focus around different types of activity. If you want to keep your primary core creative or mentally challenging work on your primary screen, and some of that less important, less challenging tasks like email in separate screens, I think it's a good habit to get into.

Roger: One last topic, you devote part of the book ... Now that you've created all our own defenses against getting distracted by email, you do devote a portion of the book to how to penetrate the defenses of other people. Either their defenses are simply their email overwhelm, which ever mode they're in. Either they're very efficient or they're simply overwhelmed, but either way there's a good chance that the email that you're sending them that you think is really important may get lost or not dealt with. What are a couple of things to do to make sure that your

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

email stands out and provoke some kind of action on the other end.

Jocelyn: Yeah, I'll give you a couple of quick tips. As you say, stemming from the idea that we're all busy and we're all overwhelmed, and so we have to take a different approach to email, trying to be very concise, be very actionable. I think maybe to do three quick tips. I think the first one is to always lead with the ask, constantly trying to make the first email what you're requesting clear right away, in the first sentence, in the first couple of sentences. Most emails, over 50% of emails are red for the first time on a mobile phone. Sometimes you're writing an important email. On your desktop, it looks like a reasonable amount, but if you look at it on a mobile phone, it looks like War and Peace.

If that ask, if that important question isn't until five paragraphs down, a busy person might not even get to it. I think leading with the ask, getting to the point right away, and if you have to explain stuff, do that lower, that's fine, but leading with the ask and always kind of previewing really important messages on your phone to understand how digestible that message looks or not, and editing accordingly.

The second one is establishing your credibility right away. Again, this is when you're reaching out maybe to someone you don't know. I think the task, the question hovering in all of our minds when we get an email from something we don't know is, "Why should I care?" essentially, so kind of using some type of stats, or data, or personal reference to kind of immediately establish your credibility with this person and indicate why they should pay attention to you and your request. Then the last one that I would say is really making it easy to say yes, making the next step clear. I think all of us are busy. We're all overwhelmed. We just want to read our email messages, say

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

yes or say no, and move on. We don't want to write a lengthy, lengthy response.

I think whether it's kind of by bulleting out next steps, or if you're writing to your boss to ask for his or her perspective on how to deal with a certain problem, don't just outline the problem, also propose a solution to the problem. Always trying to really be proactive about making that next step clear and making it easy for someone to say yes is really important.

Roger: Right. We're actually condensing and so the person can say yes or no, as opposed to throwing an issue at them and ask them what they think should be done.

Jocelyn: Precisely.

Roger: Creating something that ends up obviously being more work for them makes a huge amount of sense. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Jocelyn Gleib, author of *Unsubscribe: How to kill email anxiety, avoid distractions, and get real work done*. Jocelyn, how can people find you and your content online?

Jocelyn: They can find me at my website, which is jkgleib.com, and find information about *Unsubscribe*, my other books, just kind of general advice on how to find more creativity and meaning in your daily work.

Roger: Great. Well, we will link to there, and we'll also put your email address in the show ... No, we won't put your email address on the show notes page, but we will link also to any other resources we talked about, and I will find a link to the email, again, for those folks who do want to try getting to Inbox Zero, even though we don't recommend it, and that will be at rogerdooley.com/podcast. We'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Jocelyn, thanks for being on the show.

The Psychology of Winning at Email with Jocelyn Gleib

Jocelyn: Thank you so much for having me.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.