

# The 5 things emails are going by the wayside as Musk slinks away

Story by Hannah Natanson, Faiz Siddiqui, Emily Davies

When Elon Musk and President Donald Trump commanded all federal workers to submit weekly emails listing five accomplishments, they warned of harsh consequences: Failure to comply would count as a resignation. Musk called the emails an accountability measure needed to ensure [staff even had a “pulse.”](#)

But records obtained by The Washington Post, as well as interviews with three dozen managers and employees across government, reveal that officials refused to comply with core aspects of the directive from the beginning.

In a briefing for top human resources officers across government held just two days after Musk’s directive went out to all federal employees on Feb. 22, the Office of Personnel Management said the initiative was voluntary and noncompliance would not be considered a resignation, according to an email obtained by The Post.

Further undermining Musk’s effort, OPM leaders said in the briefing that the agency did not intend to do anything with the messages that employees did submit, the email stated.

As the billionaire prepares to exit government later this year and his influence appears to wane, the conflicting messages and confusion have had a predictable result. As of this month, agencies maintain an inconsistent patchwork of policies on the email responses, according to the Post analysis and the employees, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Some federal agencies have stopped requiring the messages. A shrinking number of departments mandate strict compliance, while others say they’re requiring the emails but are not checking for compliance or tracking responses in any way that is detectable to some employees. Many federal workers who still answer the message are either churning out lightly modified versions of the same boilerplate

each week — or treating the whole thing as a joke, such as by submitting replies in a foreign language.

A White House spokesperson declined to comment on how many agencies are still requiring the emails. Musk did not respond to a request for comment.

Musk announced the email requirement on a Saturday afternoon in February, just a few weeks into his U.S. DOGE Service's campaign to downsize the government and slash spending. The billionaire said at the time that he was obeying Trump's instructions to be more "AGGRESSIVE" toward the federal workforce.

The email, which bore the subject line "What did you do last week?" and asked for five bullet points of accomplishments, sparked consternation among government employees. Many worried both over potential privacy issues and whether they would lose their jobs if they didn't reply. Some of Trump's top advisers and Cabinet nominees [didn't like Musk's email idea, either](#) — and, after pushback, the White House clarified that Cabinet secretaries could decide whether their employees had to write up weekly accomplishments.

In recent weeks, more are opting out. The Environmental Protection Agency told employees in late March that the task would be considered "encouraged, but optional," according to an email obtained by The Post. The National Institutes of Health this month told staff that the mandate had ended, according to an email signed "NIH Executive Secretariat" and obtained by The Post.

The emails were unnecessary, the message stated, because "NIH manages its own performance review processes and will notify employees directly if any information related to work duties or performance is needed."

At the opposite extreme, a small number of agencies have institutionalized the practice or created automated forms to collect responses. The Securities and Exchange Commission, for example, has often reminded staff about the five bullet points emails in its daily internal newsletter.

"Zero idea how it's used," one SEC employee told The Post.

It is unclear precisely when Musk will leave the government; his status as a special government employee is expected to expire at the end of May. The billionaire is ready to exit because he is tired of fielding what he views as a slew of nasty and unethical attacks from the political left, according to the person familiar with his thinking. He believes his departure will not diminish the power or work of DOGE, his brainchild, the person said, noting that DOGE team members are already established across scores of federal agencies.

The administration holds up DOGE as an exemplar of how to rapidly reshape ponderous bureaucracies.

“No one can say DOGE has not achieved a historic amount of success. The results speak for themselves,” said a senior White House official, speaking anonymously to discuss internal deliberations.

The weekly update emails are a persistent feature of Musk-run companies, where they are used to drive a high-intensity work culture — but also to support personnel decisions.

A key individual involved in reviewing those weekly emails, software engineer Christopher Stanley, followed Musk [to](#) the federal government. At Twitter, now X, according to a person familiar with the situation, Stanley was the key person who received and reviewed the weekly update emails; leadership consulted the memos when making personnel decisions.

“If they were planning to do more layoffs, they would go back and look at those emails for potential layoffs and see what they’re working on,” the person said, noting that the emails could be used as a pretext for letting a staffer go, for example. “That’s just another data point for why you should lay someone off.”

Within the federal workforce, it is unclear what the email responses are being used for, if anything. There was never a central strategy for how to handle the replies, an email obtained by The Post shows.

In late February, human resources leaders known as chief human capital officers from across the government gathered for a meeting, according to the email, which

detailed summary notes from the session. The meeting was led by OPM, which acts as the human resources arm for the entire government. The first topic of discussion was Musk's "weekend email," which he had announced on X two days prior, the notes show.

In addition to declaring the emails voluntary and saying noncompliance would not count as resignation, OPM officials said their agency would not provide any further guidance to other departments about the email, although some divisions were contemplating making it a weekly requirement, according to the emailed summary.

Next, the notes show, an attendee asked, "What will be done with the information that staff have provided?"

"OPM's response — No plans," the notes state.

It is not clear who from OPM led that meeting, although other such discussions have been led by top political appointees at the agency.

At least one agency collecting the emails has announced vague plans for their fate. The acting director of OPM, Chuck Ezell, sent an email last month requiring employees to complete a weekly form with five spaces to detail accomplishments, according to OPM staffers and records obtained by The Post.

Staffers' replies will be "aggregated and shared with Associate Directors and Office Heads," Ezell wrote in his message. "This information will inform reporting to OPM leadership and will be used to track progress, make course corrections, and celebrate accomplishments."

Someone is evidently paying attention to what gets sent in, said an OPM staffer, because at least one employee was disciplined for replying with profanities.

Within the Defense Department, the initial request for one email has mushroomed into a weekly saga of several messages, said an employee there. Every Thursday or Friday, staffers receive a reminder telling them to send in their bullet points no later than the following Tuesday, with their supervisor cc'd.

After employees send in responses on Mondays, in at least some parts of the department, a team lead gathers and summarizes colleagues' replies in one message to a supervisor. The supervisor then condenses responses again and sends a summary message to another, higher-up official — and so on, the Defense Department employee said.

“Then we do it all again next week,” said the employee, who added that most people he knows in the department are submitting a slightly altered version of the same copied-and-pasted piece of text each week. “I don’t know anyone who’s manually creating a new response each week.”

At the Agriculture Department, staff initially received instructions not to reply to the email, said a USDA employee. Then area leadership told them maybe they should consider responding after all, the employee said, and gave some suggestions for ideal messages. The week after that, state-level leaders told staff to definitely send a response and forward it to their direct managers — but balked at calling the messages absolutely mandatory, according to the employee.

Since then, many confused staffers have chosen not to reply, the employee said. Some have begun responding in Russian, just to confuse whoever — or whatever AI program, as some staff like to joke — is reviewing the messages.

“I have not sent one in at all,” the USDA employee said. “I don’t think I should have to justify my job to some unknown entity, especially when I’m handling private customer information.”

The employee said they have so far faced no consequences.

In a Florida Veterans Affairs office, by contrast, one employee said her bosses warned that failing to respond would be counted against her. So she sends in replies religiously, crafting a brand-new message each time and hoping it will help her keep her job.

A Food and Drug Administration employee sends in the same vague but accurate five bullets each week. His agency is requiring responses, but he is determined not to reveal confidential information related to drug approval applications.

And in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, one employee has chosen resistance. The employee uses ChatGPT to generate 10 to 20 pages of word salad each week, then hits send.

*Elizabeth Dwoskin contributed to this report.*