

Automatic messages when you're not in the office – the infamous OOF

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“OOF” is a word you hear a lot at Microsoft. [KC Lemson](#) gave the [etymology](#) a while back (though my recollection is that it stood for “Out of Office Feature”, not that my memory is good for much nowadays). Incidentally, KC is [profiled on the Microsoft Careers site](#), though she goes under the top-secret code name “KC” there. Most people set their “vacation” message to something pretty straightforward. A brief message, a return date, and a flowchart of who can be contacted in the meantime. Here’s what one might look like. (For the sake of illustration, I made up a “[Teapot project](#)” as well some imaginary members and team mailing list. I did not make up “Kansas”, however. Believe it or not, that’s [a real state!](#))

In Kansas until March 3, checking email sporadically. Teapot shading: Fred Smith
Teapot rotation: Bob Wilson
Teapot general: tpteam
Emergency: 425.555.9595

The OOF is an opportunity for small-form-factor humor. When he left on holiday at the end of December, [Marc Miller](#)’s OOF message introduced the “flowchart” section with the heading “These people are probably also OOF”. [Jensen Harris](#)’s OOF earlier this year read

Out of office, Thursday March 31. Back on Friday.
If you are injured, dial 911.

(But don’t call 911 for a non-emergency like [this lady](#). On the other hand, KC called 911 because [she couldn’t get out of bed](#).) As for me, I try to keep my OOF under twenty words. Part of the trick is getting rid of the “flowchart”. I remember one time I simply wrote “Returning dd-mmm-yy. You’ll just have to cope until then.”

The “flowchart” section of the OOF is one of those places where beginners go overboard, listing a half dozen topics and the corresponding backup. It’s a sort of ego trip, where you can quietly show off, “Wow, look at all the things I do. How would you ever survive without me?” As with email signatures and [the amassing of physical objects](#), the more seasoned you become, the more you value the ability to keep it short and simple.

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