

Learning to say no

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Do you sometimes say yes to more tasks or events even when you feel you're barely coping with your current schedule? Why (not)?
2. What criteria do you use to determine if you can or should take on additional tasks?
3. When was the last time you said no at work? Why did you decline?
4. What is the best way to turn down a request or invitation from your boss or a colleague?

2 Reading for gist

a. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. Four women are honing their politeness skills when declining professional invitations.
2. Four female academics are perfecting their nos and have published their research about the process.
3. Four professionals track their journeys as they learn to say yes to tasks that might put them on the fast track to promotion, or not.

3 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find key words in the article that match the definitions. The paragraph number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using the same word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

1. according to an organised plan or agreed set of methods _____
(paragraph 1)
A(n) _____ investment plan allows individuals to invest a fixed amount in mutual funds every month.
2. make something like an ability more effective _____ (paragraph 1)
They hope that their recent investment in research and innovation will _____ their competitiveness.

3. a large number, a lot _____ (paragraph 2)
We use special software to analyse a(n) _____ of data that would otherwise be too overwhelming to interpret.
4. gradually get a large amount of something _____ (paragraph 4)
Apps in the food-delivery industry have _____ losses of over 20 billion US dollars.
5. always _____ (paragraph 5)
If your answer to everything is _____ yes, you may soon find yourself facing burnout.
6. happening usually or often _____ (paragraph 7)
A survey revealed that workers felt that they were _____ treated like robots.
7. large in importance, value or size _____ (paragraph 7)
Biodiversity schemes hope to involve more farmers, but _____ grants will be needed to pay agriculture workers.
8. an activity against someone, especially as punishment _____ (paragraph 7)
Staff want to speak up about misconduct, but they fear _____.
9. not based on fact (to describe a claim) _____ (paragraph 7)
While AI has caused job anxiety for some, many leaders maintain that these ideas are _____.
10. continue to do something with more determination than before _____ (paragraph 8)
The automotive giant has announced that it will _____ on hybrids and EVs.
11. put a limit on the amount of something _____ (paragraph 12)
The institute is lobbying to _____ the production of new plastics and to end plastic pollution.

12. gradually reduce the size or number of something _____

(paragraph 12)

*After a whole week of sick leave, I'm desperately trying to _____
the backlog of unread emails.*

13. the state of being messy or confused _____ (paragraph 13)

*Our plans were thrown into complete _____ when a leak left our
offices flooded.*

14. giving useful or interesting information _____ (paragraph 14)

*Our communications department is constantly trying to create high-quality and
_____ content for our audience.*

Four Scientists Take on the 'Art of Saying No'

RESEARCHERS WHO PUT THEMSELVES UNDER THE MICROSCOPE MADE SOME IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES

PILITA CLARK

- 1 There were once four scientists who decided to take a systematic approach to honing one of working life's great skills: the art of saying no.
- 2 With workloads heading to burnout levels of busyness, they agreed that in the space of one year, they would collectively turn down 100 work-related requests and track what happened as a result.
- 3 Having drawn up a spreadsheet to record what each passed up and why, and how they felt about it, they set about declining a raft of requests to review journal articles, write grant proposals or run more things at work. Together, they also turned down 31 speaking invitations – fewer than the 43 talks and guest lectures they still gave.
- 4 It took them 10 months to rack up their 100th “no”, or roughly 25 rejections each, by which time they had learnt several things. First, the act of tracking your work itself makes it easier to say no, partly because you get a better idea of everything you're doing.
- 5 Also, a firm rejection is better than a “soft no” because agreeing to, say, give a talk in a few months' time, or review a paper instead of co-writing it, invariably leads to bigger asks later. And there are useful rules to adopt, such as “does this fit with my work?”, “does it spark joy?” and “can I do it without messing up existing commitments?”
- 6 The four academics – all environmental social scientists and all female – wrote about their year in a 2022 *Nature science* journal article, which I recommend. But one of their discoveries has stuck with me since: they had no regrets about saying no.
- 7 They did routinely feel guilty and they worried about letting others down – despite visible evidence of the substantial commitments each had made. Yet they also felt their fears of missing out, or suffering reprisals for saying no, were unfounded.
- 8 I was curious to know if this was still the case two years on. When I contacted one of the four last week to ask, I found that not only did they still have zero regrets, they were doubling down on saying no. Or rather, quadrupling.
- 9 “One of our big takeaways was that 100 declines collectively is great but it's not enough,” said AR Siders, an associate professor at the University of Delaware's disaster research centre, who researches climate adaptation. “So now we're trying for 100 each in the year ending December 2024, so together we should say no to 400 things.”
- 10 Siders had so far managed 34 declines, putting her behind the other three who had recorded 37, 51 and 54.
- 11 But she was pleased to have beaten the 25-odd “nos” she achieved the last time. She put this down to strategies she adopted to make rejections easier, such as limiting the number of peer reviews she writes to two for each journal article she takes part in submitting.
- 12 She is also trying to cap the number of speaking invitations she accepts. And crucially, she is trying to whittle down big commitments that affect how well she can work, such as research projects, not just smaller things like talks.
- 13 “So even though I might say no less often, I'm saying no to bigger things and it's making a difference,” she says. When she fell ill recently she had enough slack in her schedule that getting sick didn't throw everything into disarray.
- 14 I find all this instructive, especially for women, who often find it hard to say no to far more thankless requests than giving a talk. Female employees are statistically more likely than men to be asked to take on mentoring, training and other time-eating “non-

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promotable tasks". They are also more likely to do them, according to four different female academics who wrote a 2022 book about the problem, *The No Club*.

- 15 Prof Siders had not heard of the book until after she and her colleagues published their *Nature* article. But the coincidence doesn't strike me as that odd, considering the expectation on so many women to

say yes to extra work. Either way, as a recovering yes-person, I intend to keep one idea in mind from a member of Siders' group. Work opportunities always seem lovely in the beginning. But just as cute babies grow up to be teenagers, and puppies become big dogs, you have to remember they will ultimately end up needing a lot of hard work.

FT

Pilita Clark, 28 August, 2024.

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4 Understanding the article

a. Are the statements true or false? Correct any statements that are false.

1. Together, the four academics tracked how they declined 100 requests in their personal and professional lives.
2. Their rejections included declining requests to write grant proposals, speaking and lecture invitations, as well as requests to review journal articles.
3. Tracking your work is a good practice, but it doesn't make it easier to say no.
4. A firm rejection is better than a soft no because it helps you to assert your power.
5. Useful rules include asking yourself if agreeing to the request will affect prior commitments, how it fits in with your work, or simply if it sparks joy.
6. The four scientists confessed to feeling guilty about saying no.
7. They felt their reasons for being afraid of others' reactions when they declined a request were generally founded on personal experience.
8. Two years after their initial research, the scientists were saying no much more frequently than before.
9. One scientist is using the strategy of setting a specific limit for the number of peer reviews she writes or speaking invitation she accepts in certain period.
10. Statistically, more women turn down tasks that might not lead to promotion like mentoring and training colleagues.
11. The author reminds herself to consider how work opportunities will unfold and grow before being charmed by the initial idea of them.

5 Business language – verb + noun collocations

a. Use the nouns in the box to complete the collocations from the article. Then find and circle each collocation in the article to check your answers.

adopt	decline	hone	suffer	take on
cap	draw up	make	take	throw

- _____ a systematic approach
- _____ commitment / discovery
- _____ a skill
- _____ / turn down a request / invitation
- _____ reprisals
- _____ a spreadsheet
- _____ rules / strategies
- _____ the number of (invitations)
- _____ into disarray
- _____ (new) tasks

b. Decide which of the phrases could be useful to you and use them in sentences of your own.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Apart from the three rules mentioned in the article, what other questions or prompts might be useful when considering if you should take on a new task?
- What type of tasks do you usually most regret taking on?
- Do you think it's important to say no more frequently or to say no to more substantial things? Why?
- Why do you think more women tend to be asked to do non-promotable tasks? Why do they agree to do them?
- What are the main differences between a firm rejection and a soft no?
- How would you like to hone your saying-no skills?

7 Wider business theme – saying no

Task 1

Role-play the situations below. Take turns making the invitations / requests.

You are currently extremely busy. Consider the invitation / request and follow the three rules mentioned in the article to decide if you want to accept it or turn it down.

Possible strategies to use when declining:

- ask for time to think
- lead with positivity
- be honest
- don't say sorry unless you have a reason to apologise
- don't give more information than necessary
- offer a different solution if appropriate / delegate
- decide if it is a 'no for now' or a 'definite no'

Situation 1

(Boss to employee)

Task: manage a large project that was initially your boss's responsibility. This will mean a lot more work and you're already busy, but it will help you develop leadership skills and will look good on your CV.

Situation 2

(Conference organiser to potential speaker)

Invitation: speak at an international conference in New York two months from now to share your professional experience with others in the field.

Situation 3

(HR to employee)

Task: mentor a newly hired employee in an area that you have experience in. HR offers to pay for a coaching and mentoring course.

Situation 4

(Boss to employee)

Request: accompany and entertain a colleague visiting from Japan. They have a high position in the company, and it might be good for your career, but it means entertaining them the whole weekend and cancelling your personal plans.

Situation 5

(A former university mentor to former mentee)

Task: give a talk to undergraduates about a topic that you specialise in.

Situation 6

(Colleague to colleague)

Request: join them in a meeting with a client to manage a difficult situation.

Your own situation:

Useful language

I really appreciate ...

That sounds like ... (an interesting project / a great offer / a wonderful opportunity / etc.)

At the moment, I'm focused on ...

I'm afraid this doesn't align with ... (my goals)

After taking a closer look at my calendar, I realise ... (I can't take on any other work right now). With my current workload, I won't be able to ...

Now isn't a good time for me. I would love to be involved at a later date.

I'd be happy to ... (connect you with / ask ...)

Task 2

Choose three or four of the situations. Write a rejection email for each situation. Aim for a polite but neutral / firm no.