

## **Hone your e-mail messaging skills to improve communications**

*By Andrea C. Poe*

E-mail is supposed to accelerate office communication—and it does. But the lack of interactivity and real-time communication also introduces problems. Just ask Marnie Puritz Stone. When she was as an account executive at a Dallas-based public relations firm, nearly all intra-office communication was done via e-mail—no matter how sensitive. Her managers may have felt they were being efficient, but she and her colleagues thought the managers were rude. “I think that the callousness with which e-mail delivers news—good or bad—is a poor way to show leadership,” she says. “And it creates a lot of resentment.”

One problem is you can't create tone with e-mail, which increases the potential for misinterpretations. Disagreements that might have been cleared up quickly in a face-to-face conversation often fester when the recipient misinterprets an e-mail message. Then, there's the lack of etiquette and standards, which also leads to communication snafus. “A lot of managers don't even bother to say please or thank you—or even sign their names,” says Samantha Shepard, who works in the graphics department of a New York law firm. “That doesn't make you rush to do what they want.”

The bottom line: There are real consequences of poor e-mail skills. “How you communicate with each other affects productivity, morale and retention,” says Kenneth Pritchard, a human resource and management consultant in Lusby, Md.

So, how do you improve your e-mail messaging skills—and those of your employees? By setting an example for other employees in how you use e-mail, says Carol Beaudu, president of CJB Associates, a Seattle-based HR consulting firm specializing in technological issues. “A few niceties go a long way,” says Perrin James Cunningham, president of Ethologie, a business and protocol consulting firm in Colorado Springs, Colo., and co-author with Sue Fox of *Business Etiquette for Dummies* (IDG Books Worldwide, 2001). Writing polite e-mail messages, for example, doesn't take much time and “can have a major impact on the workplace and relationships in the office,” says Cunningham.

Second, try following these guidelines from Ethologie when you're composing e-mail messages:

- Write in the same way that you would for any other form of communication. If you wouldn't give lectures that ended with “Do it now,” don't use similar language in e-mails.
- Use correct grammar. Bullet points make a message easy to read, but sentence fragments (sentences that do not contain a subject and a verb) do not. And, it's difficult to understand sentences that lack punctuation or capitalization.
- Use the spell check that comes with your e-mail package.
- Make e-mails self-contained with one subject and one message.
- Unless you're engaged in an ongoing conversation, include a greeting/and or closing, such as, “Hi, Charlene,” or “Best wishes, Bob.”

- Read messages a couple of times for clarity and tone before hitting the “send” button.
- Change the original subject line if you need to forward a long chain of e-mail to avoid a subject line such as, “FW: FW: RE: FW: RE: Our Meeting.”

It’s also important to be aware of the management considerations of e-mail use. For instance, the sheer volume of e-mail messages—including mass e-mails that are of little or no concern to the recipients—causes much more frustration among workers than is necessary. Managers shouldn’t contribute to the heavy load. “Managers, like everyone else, have to be respectful of other people’s time,” says Cunningham. Try the following tips to help “manage” your incoming and outgoing e-mail volume:

- Don’t use your in-box as a catchall folder. Read items once, then answer immediately, delete or move to a project-specific folder.
- Agree on company acronyms for subject lines, such as AR for action required or MFR for monthly financial report.
- Send group mail sparingly—use only when useful to *all* recipients. Use “reply all” and “cc” with caution.
- Ask to be removed from distribution lists you do not need to be on.
- Use the “out of office” feature and voice mail message to alert people when you are traveling.
- Before sending an attachment in a particular format, make sure the recipient can open it.
- Avoid sending attachments and graphics to people on the road, unless absolutely necessary. Such attachments can be slow to download. Post large attachments (more than 5 MB) on a web page instead.
- Be specific and helpful. If you send a 30-page attachment, point out critical information on certain pages.
- Respond to your messages as quickly as possible, preferably by the end of the same day.

Then, there’s the question of when and when not to rely on e-mail. According to Ethologie, the following do’s and don’ts should help you determine when e-mail is appropriate.

Do use e-mail to:

- Set up meetings and prepare attendees. “Thank you for making time to attend Wednesday’s board meeting. Before we meet, please review the attached articles about attention deficit disorder in mice and be ready to discuss them.”
- Recap spoken conversations. “As we discussed this morning, Jane Smith of ABC Corp. will supply 75 seat cushions for the football game next Saturday.”
- Transmit regularly scheduled news feeds, reports, etc.
- Distribute exactly the same information to multiple recipients.

Don't use e-mail to:

- Lambaste a colleague and then copy others on the message. That's tantamount to chewing out someone in front of a room full of his/her peers. Disagreements or discipline are best handled in person, or at least, over the phone.
- To write something you wouldn't want published in the newspaper. Even if you send it to someone you trust, e-mail with sensitive, mean or potentially embarrassing information has a way of being forwarded beyond your original audience.
- Don't e-mail someone who sits across the aisle from you unless you're recapping a meeting. If you have a question for discussion, try the old-fashioned approach of speaking to each other.
- Send jokes or forward chain letters.
- Respond to angry colleagues. Pick up the phone or walk into their office.

Remember, while e-mail is a fast, easy and convenient communication tool, it's not always the best choice. Certain kinds of information such as layoffs and firings should be off limits to e-mails. Even Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, whose 13 board members are scattered throughout North America, turn to the telephone when discussing sensitive matters. "When there are nuances that need to be expressed, and when tone is important, we handle things by conference call because something gets lost on e-mail," explains Coralee Whitcomb, president of the group.

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