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Some E-Mail Guidelines

E-mail has become a staple of the workforce. It's faster than priority mail, less fuss than a fax, and easier to understand than most voicemails. E-mail addresses have increased by 26,250,000 since 1987, totaling about 30 million now, and the average person receives 30-40 messages a day! More than 35% of 400 managers polled by American Management Association and Ernst & Young in 1998 say they use e-mail more than any other communications tool.

While e-mail increases productivity, however, it should never replace those critical interpersonal skills. It's poor etiquette to fire someone, deliver bad news, or discuss emotional issues through e-mail. It's certainly not the proper forum for venting personal criticism or dashing off hasty notes.

Think about who may read your message—not only whom the message is for, but also whoever else may read it. Would you say to this person the same thing you're *writing*? Have you inadvertently been sarcastic or judgmental? Is the receiver someone who's sure to put a negative spin on your message? Would someone *else* construe the message as negative? If so, use the phone or meet in person (also called F2F [face to face] by the electronically suave). Why risk creating anxiety or even distrust by sending messages that lack warmth?

Just as with all other forms of communication, there are rules of e-mail etiquette (called *netiquette*). Whether you're responding to internal company e-mail or posting replies to a public bulletin board, mind your manners.

E-mail is more like conversation than letters, memos or faxes. But you don't have any of the cues (voice, inflection, facial expression, gestures) you use when talking. It's quite easy to start a misunderstanding (a flame war) electronically. To add emphasis and attitude to e-mail, you can use special

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letters and symbols called emoticons (or smileys, frownies and winkies)—
little faces that look like this: ;) :(or ☺ ☹ ☺.

E-mail has also spawned a new abbreviated language to speed the process and
add personality to your messages. Phrases such as “by the way” and “for what
it’s worth” have been abbreviated to BTW and FWIW. You can show a little
sarcasm when giving an opinion, especially when you’re an expert on the
subject, by typing IMHO (“in my humble opinion”). Using FYI (for your
info) is quicker to type and heralds you as a savvy e-mail user.

Like with any informal communication, a smattering of humor can help. Just
know that some humor that works in person doesn’t work in e-mail and might
even make the rest of your message appear frivolous. And sarcasm almost
never works in this medium. Neither do prejudicial jokes; no one can see your
“just kidding” face. If you do make a joke, or are being lighthearted, you can
use comments like <grin> or <groan> to add clarity.

Some E-Mail Dos And Don'ts:

✓ Do answer immediately. It’s easy: Just use the *Reply* option, and off goes
your message. Be careful, however—you can’t get it back! If you don’t have
the full reply right then, still acknowledge the receipt and let the other person
know that you’ll be getting back to them.

✗ Don’t use all uppercase letters. You can use uppercase letters to
occasionally highlight items when you want special ATTENTION drawn to
them. Or set a word off with ****asterisks**** or <<brackets>>. But use caps
sparingly. Many new users of electronic services leave their *Caps Lock* on.
Not only are all caps hard to read, they are the equivalent of shouting in the
electronic world!

✓ Do leave them a hint. It’s common practice in e-mail to leave the question
you’re answering or comment you’re replying to on the reply, but don’t

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overdo it. A line or two should be all you need to remind the receiver of what they said.

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✘ Don't start with something like: "Why haven't you answered my questions?" You'll do more for the relationship if you open with a face-saving statement: "I wasn't sure if my message got through yesterday, so here it is again." Electronic messages that begin with "Why didn't you" come across as even more aggressive and authoritative than when talking on the phone or in person. Especially if you give in to the temptation to use all caps!

✓ Do use the subject line just as you would in a letter. Be succinct but informative. And don't leave the subject line from the last e-mail in which you communicated with this person unless the subject is actually still the same. In other words, if the subject changes, change the subject line to reflect it.

✘ Don't waste others' time. Get to the point, don't write too much, and don't repeat yourself. Overloading readers with unrelated or unnecessary details, or giving them information in a rambling order, keeps them from easily figuring out what's important and what's not. And send short messages (24 lines is a full screen) so readers won't have to scroll up and down to read them. The more succinct you are, the more likely it is that your message will be read.

✓ Unless you are the only person on the system, do assume that someone can, and does, read your notes. People in the US have lost jobs and been sued over incautious, hasty or prejudicial comments in e-mail. Internet messages go all around the world and may be read by thousands of people. Post a gripe about your coworkers, supervisors or friends on the Internet, and they may hand you a printout three days later—forwarded to them by a friend or acquaintance. It may only be bits and bytes on your screen, but it's true communication when it gets to someone else's screen.

✘ Don't let e-mail become a substitute for in-person or phone conversations. Guard against using e-mail to converse with your coworkers in the offices next door. Unless the message must absolutely be in writing, try communicating the old-fashioned way: F2F. Walk down the hall or to the next building to speak with colleagues. Take them to lunch. Or use the phone. Sometimes a phone conversation is actually faster!

✓ Do include your full name, title and phone and fax numbers at the end of messages if your e-mail address offers no clue to your identity.

✘ Don't send a copy of every message to everyone on your address list. Be as sparse with your electronic copies as you would be with real copies except,

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of course, in the case of news about a company-wide event. Be sure to check the cc and bc address lines carefully when responding.

✓ Do watch your grammar. The old saw says, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.” But that’s what’s happening to many e-mail users. According to Net watchers, many people who use e-mail in business have poor writing skills and grammar, or mistakenly think they can ignore the basic rules of business writing when there’s no paper trail.

The solution? Use the spelling and grammar checkers on your computer and in your head. And, whenever possible, either wait a few hours and reread your writing, or have someone else read it before you commit it to the Net. It only takes a minute to check spelling, grammar and punctuation.

✗ Don’t clutter people’s valuable electronic space with nonurgent items that you could fax or send by regular (“snail”) mail. Don’t assume that people you communicate with aren’t up to speed on the latest news and trends. They may think you’re patronizing them if you send nonrelevant information. And most of us don’t need any more e-mail jokes!

✓ All this said, DO use your e-mail. It’s a quick, effective, powerful tool for communication and efficiency. It saves trees and time. So use e-mail to discuss a group proposal, set up meetings, confirm appointments, tell coworkers about new issues and upcoming events, and learn about new concepts and developments.