

Excerpted from *Business Etiquette and Professionalism*
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Using Email Effectively

Email has become a staple of the workforce. It's has been substituted for paper mail at many companies, especially internally. Billions of people have email now, and the average person receives 50-100 messages a day (including spam). For a tool that business depends so heavily on, we put little thought into how we use it.

While email does increase productivity, it should never replace those critical interpersonal skills. Firing someone, delivering bad news, or discussing emotional issues through email is poor etiquette.

Email also increases the danger that we may move too quickly. The speed of sending a message, combined with the lack of body language, expression and tone that reveal emotion in regular conversation, require restraint and control. Email is not the proper forum for venting personal criticism or telling someone off.

Think about who may read your message—not only who the message is for, but also whoever else who 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? If so, use the phone or meet in person instead. Why risk creating anxiety or even distrust by sending messages that lack warmth?

You could also investigate other tools for home use. Twitter and instant messaging (IM) or texting is good for asking short questions of chosen groups. Flickr is a great way to share pictures. Wikis are good for collaborating on documents. Blogs are good for publishing information and having informal conversations.

Netiquette

Whether you're responding to internal company email or posting replies to a public bulletin board, mind your manners:

- **Be informal, but cautious.** Email is more like conversation than letters, memos or faxes. But you don't have any of the cues (voice inflection, facial expression, gestures) available to convey shades of meaning that you do when you talk face-to-face. It's quite easy to start a misunderstanding electronically.
- **Don't use all uppercase letters.** You can occasionally use uppercase letters to highlight items when you want special ATTENTION drawn to them, or you can set a word off with ****asterisks**** or **<<brackets>>**. But use caps sparingly. Many new users of electronic services leave their Caps Lock on.

That's the electronic equivalent of SHOUTING! It's tiresome to read, and it eliminates the availability of caps to show emphasis when you need it.

- **Be polite.** Avoid starting a message 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."
- **Make sure your message is clear.** Have you written clearly and concisely all that the reader needs to know? Or have you withheld details so the person has to read between the lines or assume the meaning. Read it out loud, putting yourself in the recipient's shoes, before hitting the "send" button. Once it's sent, it's hard to take back. Never write when you're angry or send something you wouldn't want to have circulated throughout the company or even beyond.
- **Get to the point, and don't write too much.** 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. In a 2007 study, Dr Thomas Jackson of Loughborough University, England, found that it takes an average of 64 seconds to recover your train of thought after interruption by email. So people who check their email every five minutes waste 8½ hours a week figuring out what they were doing moments before.

No matter how clever and entertaining a writer you might be, your message recipients will appreciate brevity and clarity. Save the puns and witty turns of phrase for birthday cards and toasts. State the message quickly followed by clear requests or instructions for any action needed by the recipient.

- **Don't overuse email.** Avoid cluttering people's valuable electronic space with nonurgent items that you could fax or send by "snail" mail. Don't assume that people you communicate with aren't up to speed on the latest news and trends so you have to enlighten them. They may think you're patronizing them if you send nonrelevant information.
- **Don't forward unless necessary.** Along the same line, don't forward anything but business to a business email. In fact, only forward personal emails if it's a joke that might be of interest to the receiver (most aren't). Please don't forward chain letters—many of them contain viruses and years of study show that they won't bring you fame and fortune anyway. If you must forward, strip out the other addresses to whom the email has been sent, delete the coding that ISPs tack onto the end, and change the subject line to look like it's from you personally.
- **Use the subject line.** You might be tempted to bypass this part of the email, but remember that everyone is in a hurry, including the recipient of your email. That person will appreciate the clue the subject line provides as to the

message content. It helps them prioritize and organize. And sometimes it's all you need: "Draft of response to IRS attached."

- **Keep it personal.** Keep in mind that readers will respond more willingly if you remember the human element. Start with the person's name, like in a memo. Add a personal line or two when you know the reader well, and remember the words *please* and *thank you*. The medium may be new, but the messages are tried and true.

Routinely copying others on emails clogs mailboxes and can lead to the main recipient wondering why you're doing so. Unless you have a specific reason for copying someone, keep the conversation between sender and recipient.

- **Reply quickly.** Don't let emails sit around in your queue unanswered. Get back to the sender, even if it's to say you need more time to respond.
- **Keep symbols and abbreviated phrases to a minimum.** Using "smilies" and abbreviations such as IMHO (in my humble opinion), LOL (laughing out loud), FWIW (for what it's worth) and ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing) is a trendy way to communicate your mood and meaning, but they aren't appropriate for business emails.

Email is like as a business letter. Ignoring basic rules can show disrespect for the recipient. Don't let informality spoil the recipient's opinion of you.



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