

# E-Mail Etiquette 101 for Internal Communication

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Isn't it hard to believe that e-mail as a form of communication has only really been around since the latter half of the '90's? Although a form of it was invented in the '60's (implementation of the @ sign for use in e-mail addresses wasn't until the '70's), it wasn't until the last 15 years or so that its popularity as an everyday communication tool really took hold, and its use exploded. Hard to believe because if you are like me, e-mail is a part of your everyday life now, and at work especially it has to be monitored constantly. It's where customers ask questions, we communicate with co-workers, updates are posted to shipping/ receiving departments, and the list of its uses goes on and on.

So although we can no longer do without our "necessary" addiction to e-mail, both in our professional and business lives, we must remember considerations regarding e-mail usage, since it is all too often abused these days.

The first thing to ask yourself is although sending an e-mail is easy, is it always the best choice? Remember, we *DO* have access to alternative communication, believe it or not! These methods can come in the form of face-to-face discussion (where non-verbal cues can be read by the recipient vs. e-mail where messages can be easily misunderstood); video conferences; phone calls (which can cover a lot of information in a short amount of time vs. going back and forth with lengthy e-mails); sending letters or faxes; and instant messaging systems, which are ideal for informal communications vs. abusing the e-mail system.

A recent poll was conducted to verify what recipients' biggest pet peeves are regarding e-mails they receive. I'm quite certain some of the following will resonate:

- Too many e-mails period!
- Typos (Grammar, Punctuation, you name it)
- No subject line
- LOL, OMG or other "lingo" in professional communication (TMI)
- ALL CAPS (no, I'm not shouting at you!)
- Too long / Run-on sentences (...because sometimes the sender can write things that have nothing to do with the subject and it really can have a bearing on the ultimate effect of the message in which the end effect needs to be determined causing....*yawn*)
- Group copied on scolding e-mails (because yes, you shouldn't have eaten that food in the fridge, and yes, I'm going to let the whole office know!)
- Being copied on something that doesn't pertain to you
- E-mail strings that go on and on (the pizza was ordered...thanks...you're welcome...when is it arriving?...30 minutes or so...excellent, what did you order again?) Deleeeeeeeeeee...
- Excessive use of "reply all"

Are you cringing yet, or thinking of a certain someone right now in your office? One or some of these happen to the best of us because, as mentioned earlier, e-mail is terribly misused. While we can't tell you how to run your personal life and your personal e-mail account, we do offer actual etiquette rules on how business "professionals" should use this form of communication.

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# Key Points in E-Mail Etiquette

## 1. Remember the pros of e-mails

E-mails are excellent for communication because of the following: they are efficient and economical; easier to communicate with a group; let's you attach or include extra information; and they create a record, or "paper-trail" of messages sent. Because they do have a record though, that can be a good segue into the cons of e-mail.

## 2. Remember the cons of e-mails

One, that paper trail or "accidental send" can haunt you forever. Once you click that "send" button, there is no going back, even though you can regret it all you want. Which brings us to the next point, the power of "forwarding". A recipient can take your well intended joke, forward it to the rest of the office, and guess what? Next thing you're standing in the soup line at the local shelter. All kidding aside, even if it is a well intended e-mail, the recipient can forward it to another party with changes to the original information. Not cool, so always use a PDF of attached information so that's it's harder to alter.

Two, no non-verbal cues. We can easily misunderstand what the sender is "saying" because we cannot see/ hear the facial, body, or audio signals the sender is conveying behind the message being sent. This makes sending e-mails **ABSOLUTELY** inappropriate for situations such as disciplinary actions, bad news, terminations, layoffs, corporate takeover, or even formal invitations. This goes for sending e-mails too. A proper tip is to say your e-mail out loud in a variety of tones (happiness, sarcasm, anger) before clicking send. *Would you say it to their face? What is the worst case scenario with the words chosen to represent your thought at that time? Be careful...*

Three, unnecessary exchanges lead to a never-ending stress for us in this day and time. E-mails have to be monitored chronically in some instances, and how many times are you going to have to forward chain e-mails, lest you "[break the chain](#)", and bring about the world's demise even earlier than the December 23rd Mayan Calendar ending!

Aghhhhh!! Between work and home, e-mail is getting to run the show; it's constant chimes to remind you of another task to perform. (*Or is it just another mindless spam e-mail from a vendor you used once 5 years ago, or did a co-worker just order pizza?*) Doesn't matter, you need to check it, because you are now a new-age robot, checking and typing incessantly through your e-mail client, determined to succeed in getting through every one of those 142 new e-mails from the one-day you were sick (*dang buffet!*).

*NOTE: Consider the use of "Reply" and "Reply All". Who needs the response? Also, consider BCC's on the original message you may not have seen. When you hit "Reply All", ask yourself who are you really responding to? Instead, always forward the e-mail so that you have to type the names in. Also, when you do forward an e-mail, ask yourself the following: Does this person have a reason/ right to see this? Can I edit this message and information down? Do I have permission to even forward this?*

## 3. Be positive!

Certain messages are just better said face-to-face (death, layoffs, etc.). However, a good portion of messages that we send through e-mail, even if offering up a response the recipient may not like to hear, can be worded in a positive fashion to ultimately change the whole tone of message. Some examples:

*Negative tone:* We are sorry to advise you that the alterations will not be completed until Wednesday.

*Positive tone:* Wednesday is the earliest that alterations will be ready.

*Negative tone:* We close every day at 9 P.M.

*Positive tone:* For your convenience, we are open until 9 P.M. every day.

*Negative tone:* I hope you're not too busy to talk...

*Positive tone:* I would like to talk...

*NOTE: Remember, the idea here is not to overly analyze things, but simply serves as a reminder that with subtle changes to existing words, you can change the feeling and tone the overall message has for the recipient. Reread your professional e-mails to make sure they are indeed written in the "positive" tone.*

## 4. Sell your message with the subject line

Subject lines can break even the strongest of messages. All caps, irrelevant topic listed, or no subject line at all usually reflect poorly on the sender. Tips that are useful when creating a powerful subject line that grabs attention is to *keep it short, be specific, inform (don't make them guess as to what the message is really about), avoid overuse of the words "urgent" and "important", and change the subject line if after many "forwards" the original subject of the message has changed.*

## 5. Organize e-mail content

Subject lines can be ended with the acronym "EOM", or "end-of-message", for ultimate brevity. That is to say the most concise e-mail is one that is just the subject line (to the point, succinct, and no message in the body). For me though, personally, I find this type of e-mail still very rare to send or to receive, as even when it's done correctly it tends to still create confusion on the part of the recipient. This means that most subjects need to be accentuated with an actual message, and this is where a format comes into play.

The way to start the message of the e-mail is with the "call to action", or the most important information. After the most important information is addressed within the opening lines, make sure to use supporting information, such as referencing an attached document, reasserting the background story, or even with references to past e-mails. Lastly, finish with a recap, or brief summary.

Always though, shoot for a short and to the point e-mail, if possible. Since folks these days receive so many, having an extra long, convoluted message is not ideal, as you yourself probably don't like to receive those (I know I don't). Remember to try to have just one specific message per send; otherwise, by incorporating multiple messages, the recipient may miss out on some of the other main ideas you are trying to convey.

## 6. Gender Neutral Language

This may be nitpicking, but another pet peeve of many is the use of gender in language. I personally don't mind, but some find it offensive to look at an e-mail with terms such as "his employees", "fireman", "chairman", or

"stewardess". Instead, try "their employees", "firefighter", "chair" or "chairperson", and "flight attendant". This is a politically correct time we live in, and so always think about these and other cultural implications before hitting the fabled "send" button. Make sure to always consider your audience, and whether or not it's acceptable to be informal, or to use certain humor.

In this month's blog you learned about pet peeves, or bad habits, that drive coworkers crazy, and how these common practices may be causing your e-mails to be ignored, avoided, or instantly deleted. By putting some extra thought and time into your message and overall tone, your e-mail message will be professional, tactful, and optimally received. Use positive writing to improve negative messages, and keep every e-mail conversational in tone, even if the topic is formal, to get the results you want. One last rule to never forget when sending out an e-mail: **use common sense**.

*NOTES: (1) When you use the CC field (use to be called Carbon Copy, but now known as Courtesy Copy), remember that it's only intended as a FYI for the recipient. They are not obligated to respond to a CC from you (or vice-versa), but instead are just being kept "in the loop". Some use this field as a general response needed from anyone included (I myself do this), but CC is only a FYI field. (2) When creating a signature block template for regular business use in ending e-mail messages, fields to consider including are: Full Name, Title, Organization, Address, Phone Number, Fax Number, E-Mail Address, Web Page, and/ or Logo/ other Quote. In addition, keep in mind that digitizing your signature is a bad idea because if you include your actual signature, someone can steal it and use it to sign off on all kinds of things.*

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