

E-mail etiquette: A matter of survival

Business people send out some six trillion e-mail messages each year, according to US-based Ferris Research. That's probably not much of a surprise to most office workers today, who have seen e-mail usurp meetings and face-to-face conversations as a primary form of communication.

What may be less obvious, however, is just how important e-mail is to your reputation. 'The potential for electronic disaster is huge if you are not careful to write messages that are clean and clear,' says Nancy Flynn, a US-based communications specialist and author a book on e-mail etiquette.

It's no longer enough simply to avoid common e-mail blunders such as using all capital letters, failing to proofread your messages, or sending off a message in anger. 'Careless e-mail messages,' Flynn notes, 'have resulted in lost productivity, financial losses...and even lawsuits.'

Given the amount of e-mail that business people receive these days, it's no treat to see a lengthy e-mail message from a business associate. E-mail is used most effectively to communicate information that would be a waste of time to convey face to face.

If what you have to say to a business colleague would occupy more than two paragraphs in an e-mail message, a phone conversation or personal meeting makes more sense. Use e-mail to save time - not to waste it.

Brevity and manners are not mutually exclusive. While you may get points for writing e-mail messages that are succinct, you'll lose them just as quickly for coming across as rude or unpleasant. Words like 'please' and 'thank you' pay dividends that far exceed the effort you expend in writing them.

If you absolutely must say something unpleasant to a business colleague, do it in person or by phone. An unpleasant e-mail message hangs around and can be read over and over again.

Also, don't be afraid to use smileys judiciously to help you convey some pleasant emotion that would give your sentences the appropriate emotional tenor.

A well-placed electronic wink or smile just might make your recipient smile when reading your message.

Whom you 'copy' on an e-mail message can say as much as your e-mail message itself. Everyone knows that, too, so don't copy someone on a message unless your primary recipient can easily understand why others are being sent a copy.

On a related note, never put people on the 'cc' line in order to prod your primary recipient into taking your message more seriously.

If you write to someone, for instance, and have the person's boss on the 'cc' line in order to say to the recipient, 'you need to answer this e-mail message', you're making yourself look bad to everyone witnessing the behaviour - and you're unlikely to be able to count your recipient as an ally in the future.

Remember that most of the time you should air grievances in person, or on the telephone, not through e-mail.

If you're writing an e-mail message to a group of people and you would like a response from each of them, take the time to write to each of them individually rather than sending one message out to everyone at once.

You can still save time by copying the same text as the body of your message, but by e-mailing each person and placing a 'Dear Claudia' or 'Dear Juan' before the body of your message, your recipient will feel more compelled to answer than if he or she were just one of, say, ten people to whom the message was sent.

Remember that e-mail messages can get you into trouble - not just because of what you say but also because of how you say it. Be sensitive to language that could be construed as sexist, avoid jokes, as they could be taken the wrong way, avoid referencing sensitive subjects, such as religion or politics, be respectful, pleasant, and cooperative at all times.

In short, use your e-mail correspondence as an opportunity to make colleagues feel safe with you. If you do, you will quickly develop a good reputation and be seen as a team player. Greater productivity will ensue.

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