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You've Got Mail

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You've Got Mail

Some helpful tips on avoiding the pitfalls of electronic mail

FROM: JUL-AUG 2004 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

In 2003, as part of its investigation into Enron's alleged manipulation of energy prices, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) seized the company's e-mail records as evidence, and posted 1.6 million Enron e-mails online for review. As Enron employees routinely used the company's internal e-mail system for personal communication, thousands of pieces of private correspondence, complete with names of senders, were put on public display. Even confidential documents, such as employee performance reviews and executive salary packages, were accessible by anyone with access to the Internet. And as a final *coup de grâce*, some of the posted e-mails contained employee bank records and Social Security numbers. The FERC eventually removed the e-mails containing Social Security numbers and performance evaluations, but not before the grave embarrassment of many people.

The lessons were painful ones. Employees learned it's unwise to use a workplace e-mail system to transmit personal, sensitive, or confidential information that would be embarrassing or harmful if made public. Employers moved to establish stricter guidelines on separating business e-mail from other communications, and on purging e-mail not required for business, legal, or regulatory purposes.

From the early days of "You've got mail" to today's crowded inboxes, overflowing with company announcements, work-related correspondence and spam, e-mail has become an indispensable part of business communication. And in the sometimes bewildering world of e-mail etiquette, there are three main areas to consider: whether e-mail is the appropriate format for your message; the correct composition and wording of your message; and how to efficiently manage high volumes of mail.

Is e-mail the right format for your message?

E-mail is an ideal way to communicate simply, quickly, and inexpensively. The electronic format means it's flexible, and can be used to contact someone who is not available by phone. It is also an effective way to communicate with more than one person at a time while maintaining a written record of the communication — an electronic paper trail — that can be accessed for follow-up and background. Yet despite the many advantages of e-mail, it may not always be the most appropriate format for your message.

It is important to remember that e-mail is not private. Most company policies clearly state that e-mail messages sent and received in the workplace are the property of the company, meaning that communication should be succinct and professional. E-mail may not be the best format to use when what you have to say is lengthy, complicated, or entails negotiation. Consider confidentiality — yours, your organization's, and the recipient's. Reflect also on the sensitivity of the content. This is not the appropriate medium in which to

conduct a performance review, as the correspondence could be seized as legal evidence if the named employee were to later file a wrongful dismissal claim.

Do not use e-mail if your message is emotionally charged. E-mail, like any other form of written communication, does not give the reader any hints as to meaning through gestures or body language, nor does it offer any tone or voice inflection clues like a telephone conversation does. Firing off an angry e-mail without much thought can provoke an even more heated response, and can quickly escalate into what some wags irreverently refer to as “e-mail warfare,” whereby e-mail salvos fly back and forth, each subsequent message more emotionally charged than the last, and each including an increasing number of names in the Cc line.

Finally, it is important to remember that e-mail is not a substitute for face-to-face communication. You should not use e-mail as a way of avoiding direct contact with someone. It is a business tool and is appropriate in some situations, but not all.

Composing messages

Because many people are flooded with more e-mail than they can realistically handle, it is crucial that e-mail communication be easy to understand. If your message is hard to decipher, it will not only get dropped to the bottom of your recipient's to-do list but will also frustrate him or her — not a good basis on which to build a strong business relationship.

There are five standard components in an e-mail message: subject, greeting, body, closing, and signature.

- An informative **subject line** is essential if you want recipients to read your message and then act on it. People who get a lot of e-mail often read no further than the subject line when making a decision as to whether to read or delete. Ideally, the subject line should be no longer than 10 words.
- The **greeting** or salutation can be informal, such as Hi or Hello, but it is recommended that you use the name of the person you are addressing, e.g. *Dear Mr. Wilson, Hello Amy,* or simply *Charles*.
- The **body** of the message should contain three elements: the context or background, so that the reader can follow the thread of the conversation without having to go back through previous messages or related materials; a complete explanation or answer to each open question or concern; and a call for action (or question to be resolved). This last element is the most important part of the message, as it tells your reader what you want them to do. If you make it simple and direct, people are more likely to act.
- A **closing or sign-off** is needed before you insert your signature, such as *Regards, Thank you,* or the more informal *Cheers*.
- Finally, a **signature** that lists your contact information, including your full name, title, business name, address, and office/cell/pager/fax numbers. A complete signature is essential so that recipients can reply in any medium (fax, phone) or can forward or print your message without having to research your contact information.

And never write an e-mail using all capital letters. Not only is it hard on your reader's eyes, it is also considered the written equivalent of shouting. Also, double-check your spelling before you send e-mail as proofreading is a critical step .

How to manage the clutter

The responsibility for “clutter management” rests with both the employer and the employee. Organizations must implement and adhere to standards to encourage the efficient, ethical, and legal use of e-mail. Clear guidelines on what constitutes acceptable use of e-mail in the workplace should be established.

Just as importantly, employees need to keep their mailboxes organized. The 4-D approach to e-mail management is an efficient way to sort and prioritize your inbox:

- Your first decision is whether to **delete**.
- If you don't delete, your next choice is to **delegate**. Can someone else handle this? If so, forward the note, following the accepted style guidelines listed earlier. Be sure to use this option judiciously, however, as you don't want to be the reason for someone else's clogged inbox.
- Your third possible option is to **do now**. A good rule of thumb is that if dealing with the message will take less than two minutes, do it right away. If it will take longer than two minutes, schedule it to be done later in the day.
- Your final option is to **dock** (file) it. Some e-mails need to be retained, but it's a good idea to reconsider the delete option before you decide to file an e-mail. Ask yourself whether you really need to keep the information, or if you could access it elsewhere if needed.

Keep these additional de-cluttering tips in mind: don't abuse the Cc option when sending e-mail — you're often only creating clutter for someone else. And, avoid sending huge attachments with e-mails, as they can often bog down networks.

When e-mail was invented in the late 1960s, it was launched “mainly as a way for nerds at UCLA to play Dungeons & Dragons with geeks at MIT” [Loftus, Margaret; U.S. News; March 22, 1999]. Today it has grown into one of the most widely used forms of business communication. Exercise some solid e-mail etiquette, and you'll soon discover that this communication tool can work for you instead of against you.

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