

E-MAIL ETIQUETTE

I spent an hour this morning sifting through e-mail — that's normal. In fact, I deal with more than 50 messages every weekday, which amounts to more than 13,000 messages a year! Many people deal with far more. The messages are of every sort: simple letters, reports to groups, compilations of long exchanges, urgent requests, chatty essays, and plenty of advertising. The last of these (spam) has become a major problem in recent months, and one wonders whether spam will eventually overwhelm the value of e-mail. We seem helpless to solve the problem. But the incidence of poor e-mail etiquette from ordinary senders has increased as well, and we *can* do something about that: We can apply common sense and change our behavior.

Here are nine rules about use, format, and responsibility — the basics of e-mail etiquette — that will make dealing with thousands of e-mails easier for all of us.

How to use e-mail

Phoning. More and more frequently I receive messages with a request for an immediate response, and a final sentence that warns: “If I do not receive a reply in the next hour, I will go ahead with . . . “ E-mail does *not* replace the phone. Many of us have meetings during the day, or go on trips, or simply do not read e-mail every ten minutes. Reading and responding to e-mail every few minutes is equivalent to talking on the phone all day — occasionally both are necessary, but repeatedly doing either one is unproductive. If you need an answer in the next few hours, pick up the phone.

Replying. Every message is sent by someone to one or more people. You can either reply to the sender or you can reply to the sender and recipients — you have to make a choice. You should be especially careful when replying to a message sent to a large number of people or to an alias. E-mail storms are created when someone on a list replies to all, recipients write back to complain, still others write back, and so forth. Those sending e-mail to large groups can help by indicating clearly that replies should go only to the sender. Every time you reply to a message, check the list of recipients before you send it.

Sharing. A common aphorism asserts that you should always assume your message will be made public; it is easy to share e-mail with many people. On the other hand, photocopying letters and distributing them has been possible for years, yet people don't issue similar warnings for paper letters . . . because people already know it's poor etiquette. E-mail *is* more public because it is available to more people (for example, to system administrators), but we need to extend our ethical behavior for normal mail. E-mail from one person to another should *never* be shared with others unless you have permission (or it is obviously intended to be shared.) The same etiquette applies to paper letters and e-mail.

How to format e-mail

Identifying. Many people with large amounts of e-mail try to keep it organized. Having a dozen messages from the same person, but with blank subject lines (or subject lines that all read “RE”), doesn't help. You should *always* fill in subject lines and fill them in with meaningful information (not “important message” or “meeting”.)

Including. One of the strengths of e-mail is the ability to include a message in the reply. This is also one of its weaknesses. Sometimes, providing the entire thread of messages is helpful, but often it is not. It is better to think about what should be included each time you reply. Most

importantly, place your reply at the *top* of the included message, not at the bottom. No one wants to scroll through screens of old material to find your reply buried at the bottom.

Signing. While many e-mail addresses provide information about the sender, deciphering the information is not always easy. It is polite to include a “signature” at the end of your message — your name, affiliation, and (perhaps) address and phone number. But a few lines are sufficient: Signature blocks with many lines of personal data, or with cute phrases and quotes, merely waste space, and quickly change from cute to tiring.

How to be responsible

Vacationing. When e-mail was new people became enamored with the ability to automatically reply when away from the office. I have seen people initiate vacation mail even for day-trips. Vacation mail is an anachronism, left over from the days when e-mail was a strange new way to communicate. When I write to someone — especially someone in a list of people — I don’t want to know that he is on vacation. When you will be out of the office for a period of time, tell your important friends and colleagues; other people don’t care. Vacation mail is almost always unnecessary.

Attaching. Some people want to ban all attachments. That’s silly — don’t ban all attachments, just use them wisely. Attachments are a convenient way to share files with colleagues. They are *not* meant to distribute information to large numbers of people. Sending a giant file to a huge group of people is both wasteful and rude. It takes up bandwidth, and for many people who might read the message over a modem, it takes up time. As a general rule, send attachments only to colleagues you know well. (You know them well if you know what software they use and whether they want to receive your attachment.)

Mass mailing. From time to time, everyone has to send out e-mail to a large list of people. When this happens, here are three absolute rules you must follow. First, *never* send the mail in a way that allows anyone to reply to all the recipients — ask an expert how to use an alias that will prevent people from replying to the entire list. Second, *always* add instructions at the end of the message telling people how to remove themselves from future mailings (and test them to make certain they work). Third, *always* include the name of a real person along with contact information so that recipients can contact someone to comment or complain.

Finally, while it may not be a rule of etiquette, here is good advice that is often repeated (and also often ignored). Always wait before responding on a serious issue. E-mail discussions can have the immediacy of a conversation, without the body language and without the transience of the spoken word. Every sentence you write can be read and reread for hidden meaning. Compose a response; read it over; then wait for a day to read it a second time. I have ignored this advice on a number of occasions — I have always regretted it.

John Ewing