Email etiquette

By Nic Neath
November 2010

Email is now one of the most popular methods of communication inside and outside of work. We send emails to family, friends, our bosses, our accountants, even our doctors' surgeries. Email is also responsible for considerable confusion, dispute, bad feeling between individuals and time wasted.

Email, e-mail, electronic mail, dates back to the early nineteen sixties and the evolution of computers and, of course, the internet - as the internet grew, so did people's use (and abuse) of email. Unlike other forms of communication, such as letters and presentations there has been little to help people consider their technique. Whilst the national curriculum might now include email etiquette there are some many millions of us who make it up as we go along.

We use the internet and email a lot! Something in the region of 13.9 million households had internet connection by 2006, with email use one of the two most common online activities noted. That's a lot of signing in, reading your mail and replying (or not).

We thought you might like a few ideas on things to consider when emailing at work and we would like to develop this as an online resource on our website, if you would like to add to the content (we will credit you as the source appropriately!) Please do feel free to email, post or call with your thoughts to us.

• Consider if it is the right medium? A phone call could take less time overall with both parties free to elucidate or clarify. An email might evoke negative responses, such as the recipient feeling devalued, silenced or conversely forced into responding – can you be sure not to evoke these responses?

• Match your language and salutation to the appropriate level of the personal or professional relationship; it should be similar to the way you would actually speak to that person face-to-face or in a typed letter.

• Notice if there is a difference between private and public conversations. Email is not private and most businesses now regard it as public as standing in any office and speaking out loud (WikiLeaks!). Emails could be read by anyone either in control of an IT system, privy to your passwords, sufficiently skilled in software hacking, or walking past your desk!

• Imagine how many emails your recipient may be receiving and chose a title identifying the importance and relevance of your communication.

• Do not over use the importance indicators and flags.

• Avoid smilies, icons, or fun images for professional communications.

• Avoid using lots of fonts as they can make it harder to read and not all email software packages will be able to reproduce decorative fonts, so your artistic flair might be wasted.

• Use italics, bold and underlining with restraint – try not to highlight too much in your communication – these forms of written emphasis can be interpreted as shouting!

• Use templates cautiously, especially set signatures which include a valediction. Whilst having your position and contact details as standard (as you might on printed headed stationery), some people may regard a standardised valediction as a lazy and remote way to complete your correspondence. Try to keep the format for contact details simple and offer the relevant information.

• Watch out for background colours, motifs or images. It may take longer for your email to be downloaded by the recipient.

• Do not assume the formatting you use will appear in the same way when opened by the recipient – try to keep it simple. Particularly, watch out for line, paragraph and page breaks. Sometimes they appear as > symbols in the middle of an email making it harder for the email to be read.

• Review grammar and avoid slang or text shortcuts. If possible compose your email, put it into draft and review it later, this helps you see mistakes. Or consider typing your correspondence in a word (or similar) document and copying into your email window – this may help you pick up spelling and grammatical errors (watch out for format changes). Ensure recipients will understand any jargon or abbreviations used.

• If you attach documents make sure they are of an appropriate size, format and are named informatively. Remember not everyone has the latest version of software and files saved in a new format cannot always be opened by older versions.

• Consider what virus screening you might need to account for at the bottom of your email.

• Increasingly organisations use disclaimers on their email correspondence – explore what (if any) disclaimer you should include.

• Avoid using read receipts – you have lived for this long not knowing if someone has opened an envelope. Don't assume a read receipt actually means a person has opened and read the contents of your email. Explore other ways to invite them to acknowledge your communication.

• Watch out for sending out many emails at once. We use our email sometimes like a to-do list and if we are having a productive day, we can then send many emails with jobs done, reports of progress, material to be read and absorbed or responded to (I do this) and whilst it might feel great, recipients may feel a little under barrage – if you know you have many to send out, consider warning people and maybe grouping the emails together.

• Imagine someone else (someone who's opinion counts) reading your email – are you happy with what they may be reading, if not are you sure you should be sending it?

• You have to add tone and emotive language if you wish there to be emotional content. To check for this try reading your email in the most flat (or even angry) voice and decide what you might need to add in to convey warmth and respect.

• Make sure you are clear about the point of your email – is it information giving, are you asking for a response?

• Use humour cautiously and appropriately.

• Be considerate when using the address fields, some people regard their personal email addresses as private as their phone numbers – if you wouldn't normally share their phone number then don't share their email address – use the BCC field and send the original message to your own email address.

National Office of Statistics http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?ID=6