



# The E-mail Is Mightier Than The Sword!

Ahh, e-mail. What a wonderful tool to help us communicate better! The purpose of business e-mail is to exchange relevant information in a clear, helpful, non-threatening way. At times however, we may send or receive a message that does not meet this ideal.

We don't always realize the impact that our written word can have on others. Have you ever received an e-mail and wondered,

- "What did they mean by that!"
- "What do they want?"
- "Why are they so mad!"

E-mail messages can sometimes frustrate us, so to reduce the chance of miscommunication, I've gathered e-mail etiquette tips from various sources on the Internet for you to consider.

## Receiving E-mails

### **Ooops**

If you receive a message intended for another person, don't just ignore it. Instead reply back with a short explanation: "I seem to have received this in error."

### **Have you been flamed?**



To be flamed means that you've received an e-mail that has made you want to respond in many, not-so-nice words.

If a message initially makes you upset, here are some things to consider:

- Try not to take the e-mail personally  
Since you don't know the background events for the sender, you can't know what the sender's original intentions were. Assume the person sending the message didn't wake up that morning with the sole purpose of upsetting you.
- Look for the facts in the message that support the sender's comments.
- If you feel you must, draft a response but take some time before sending it. Reconsider your response after you've thought about the impact it will create.

Remember: Unlike telephone and personal conversations that fade with time, impulsive e-mail responses can sit around in mailboxes, be printed out, circulated and will sometimes acquire a level of importance that you never intended.

Consider your alternatives - Would a phone call be better? Should I go over and talk to them in person?

### Composing E-mails

Here are some tips on how to keep from creating a 'flame' situation:

- Avoid the expression of extreme emotion or opinion in an e-mail message.
- Don't discuss performance issues, make personal attacks or gossip.
- Never criticize the actions of third parties without giving them the opportunity to respond. Always CC the 3<sup>rd</sup> party so they have a 'heads up' on what is being said or done.
- Avoid joke telling. They can be misinterpreted by any number of people that may end up seeing your message.

- Don't say anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't say to that person directly face to face.
- Capitalize words only to highlight an important point or distinguish a title or heading. Capitalizing whole words that are not titles is generally interpreted as SHOUTING!

Instead of capitalizing, use an *\*asterisk\** around a word or underline to emphasize a point.

## **Other points to ponder...**

### **Subject Lines**

- Your subject line should be the headline for your message. Ensure it relates to the message content.
- Create single subject messages whenever possible. For example, if you have three separate items to cover, use three short messages. This allows each message to be filed, retrieved and forwarded separately according to content.

### **Message Body**

- Consider the content of your message. **There is no such thing as private e-mail.**  
Also, once you press 'send', you have zero control as to what happens to that message. The person you send it to may forward a copy to thousands of others. Ask yourself, "Would I be comfortable if this e-mail was seen by everyone in my office?"
- Get to the point quickly! Your most important statements should appear in the first paragraph. Details can follow in subsequent paragraphs.
- Avoid misinterpretation of dates by spelling out the month.  
Example: 24 JUN 98 or JUN 24 98
- Make use of bullets and short paragraphs whenever possible.

The more succinct you are the more likely your message will be:

- read
  - understood
  - acted upon
- Use attachments when sending considerable supporting information.

### **Abbreviations**

Unlike texting, where your intended audience is usually familiar with the lingo, business email will reach people who won't always be on the same wavelength as you. So it is very important to limit the acronyms and abbreviations you use. They have the potential to frustrate the recipient of your message.

So when using an abbreviation, ensure you have used the full length of the word previously and indicated what the abbreviation means. Example: Conflict Resolution (CR). Now you can use the CR acronym throughout your email with confidence that the receiver will know what you are talking about.

### **Emoticons**

A large part of effective one-on-one conversation is the use of visual cues - facial expressions and body gestures. Tone and volume of voice also impact how a message is received.

Since there are no visual or auditory cues with e-mail, users have come up with something called "emoticons". They are simple strings of characters or images that are interspersed in the e-mail text to convey the writer's emotions.

Keep in mind that in general, emoticons are not appropriate for business correspondence and will not substitute for clear and concise writing.

## **Closing your message**

- Put forth your recommendations. Explain what you will do to resolve a problem.
- Ask for an action. For example, let your recipient know what you need in order to complete a task. Do you need information or an action completed by a certain date? Ensure you are specific.
- Say, 'Thanks'.
- Identify yourself clearly. Mike Lund, Conflict Resolution Practitioner

## **Check and Re-check.**

- Re-read your message one last time.
- Use the spell check.
- Double check who you are sending to. Is it the correct name/ distribution list?
- Your e-mail represents the office where you work - be sure your written communication reflects the professionalism that is expected.

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## **One last tip...**

If you are going to be away from the office, use the out of office auto reply feature.

Be specific: Indicate when you will be back, if your e-mails are being forwarded and if so, to whom. This way, when you are sent e-mails, the sender won't expect a prompt reply.

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E-mail can be a terrific communication tool, but because it can be a fairly impersonal activity (it's just you and your keyboard), we sometimes forget that there is a human on the other side that will be impacted by our message. So when e-mailing, picture that person sitting next to you.

And if you receive an e-mail that frustrates you, have faith that the sender didn't realize how much you would be affected. This "don't take it personally" perspective will then allow you to focus on the content of the message and hopefully be able to feel less upset.

As with any other form of communication, e-mail's effectiveness rests with how well you use it. So keep the above tips in mind next time you send a message and hopefully you won't ever need a fire extinguisher!

Mike Lund - Conflict Resolution Practitioner