

Business email etiquette

Tips and techniques for handling business email professionally and efficiently

By Jane Hodges

Billions of emails are sent every day. Email links individuals and work teams in the business world. It is a fast, essentially free and extremely efficient way to communicate with one person or many. In many organizations, people are overwhelmed by the number of emails they receive and must respond to on a daily basis.

Mike Song, CEO of getcontrol.net, an email etiquette training company, says “The average professional sends and receives 147 emails a day and spends 2.5 to 3 hours each day handling them,” based on the results of more than 40,000 responses to a survey by his company. With all this email flying back and forth between inboxes and time spent handling it all, it is more important than ever to understand email etiquette.

Rules on email etiquette vary from workplace to workplace, so it is important to ask colleagues and managers about norms in your office. Here are some etiquette tips that work in most offices.

When to text, type, or telephone

In many workplaces, instant messenger (IM) is popular because it lets coworkers quickly discuss yes/no questions without noisy cube huddles or phone calls. If you’ve got nuanced question, using the phone might be faster; however, in some office cultures, email is the preferred medium because it helps managers keep a record (however scattered) of communications with workers.

Is the message really necessary?

Companies spend a lot of time and money controlling spam. Make sure that you aren’t contributing to the glut of unnecessary and unwanted emails that waste other workers’ valuable time. Make sure that what you’re sending is helping you or the recipient(s) move forward on work.

Don’t over-communicate; avoid using “reply all” unless everyone needs the information. You don’t need to write “thanks” to a group on email. You don’t need to send a note to let someone know an attachment came through—unless they’ve requested confirmation or the recipient routinely expects you to do this. Only copy your boss on emails that he or she has requested. Also, ask yourself if it’s really urgent or high priority before flagging the message as such.

Choose subject lines carefully

Be specific about what’s in the email so key recipients will read it quickly and can file it appropriately. Also, rename the subject line if your conversation is changing course. Subject lines can cause the recipient to overlook your message or not be able to find it when doing a search later.

To the point

Make sure you read the sender’s email carefully and respond to all of his questions to avoid further questions or confusion. When you are writing an email, Song recommends you “put your bottom line up front.” This immediately tells the recipient what you want him to know or what you are asking him to do. “The contents of your emails should be clear, concise and actionable,” Song adds.

Formal or casual style

Some companies and industries expect a more formal style of email communication. You should familiarize yourself with the culture before sending an email. Older workers who were accustomed to writing formal letters may also send and expect in return a more formal email. This means a more formal address: “Dear Mr. Smith: ...” and a more formal closing: “Sincerely, ...” In general, however, “the trend in email is toward a friendly, more direct style of communication,” says Song. This means that most people start the email with: “Hi Mary, ...” and often close with just their name.

For public consumption

Remember that what you write to co-workers or project leads at work could end up forwarded around the office—not maliciously, but perhaps when someone is added to a project team. While co-workers often become friends, if you must ask a personal question or note (like confirming an after-work happy hour), send it separately from messages about work matters.

Keep it professional

For work email, avoid informal writing or slang. Use proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Capital letters and bold-faced type imply to the reader that you are angry. Also, don’t use emoticons, animated characters or colorful backgrounds and borders, as all of these stylistic elements may seem unprofessional. Testing shortcuts are also inappropriate for the office email.

Most importantly, never send or forward emails containing offensive, libelous or defamatory material, chain letters, viruses or spam.

Always make sure you proofread your emails before sending them. It is common to want to fire off a quick note, but you should always review before you hit “send.” In fact, if an email has your blood boiling, don’t respond immediately. Take a day to calm down, if time allows, and review your calm response before sending.

Set expectations when sending or responding

Unless you work in an industry in which you are expected to respond to email in almost real time, the generally accepted rule is that you should respond to an email within 24 hours of receiving it. If you need time to do additional research before answering the question, respond quickly with your estimated time for follow up.

When sending email, be sure to indicate when you need a response. This not only clarifies your expectations for the recipient, but also increases the likelihood that you will get the information when you need it.

The contents of your email should be clear, concise, and actionable!

Quick fact (Source: USPS.gov and Email Statistics Report by Radicatt, April 2010):

