IT Connection
Don't Hit Send!
Avoid These Common E-mail Pet Peeves

By Jean Kelley

[March 2010] E-mail has made it real easy to communicate around the country – or the world – in near real time. No envelopes nor stamps to lick, no trip to the Post Office. Just hit "Send." And therein lies the issue. Sometimes it is too easy; the easy informality and the speedy transmission of email often can result in sending some messages that should never go out. Jean Kelley's suggestions will help prevent that.

Spam, e-mail, chain letters, and obnoxious or off-color jokes. These are just a few of the things that annoy business professionals when it comes reading the daily e-mail. While you are likely not sending any of these things, what if your e-mails to people are just as annoying?

E-MAIL CAN HURT A BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP

Unfortunately, many people are unknowingly irritating co-workers and clients with bad e-mail etiquette and habits. Even worse, the offenders are tarnishing their reputations in the process, unaware that their e-mails reflect their personal and company brand, their image, and their credibility.

If you have ever wondered why people do not take action on your e-mails or why this productivity tool seems to waste more of your time than it saves, it is possible that you may be guilty of exhibiting a few of the more common traits the e-mail community might list as their pet peeves.

WATCH OUT FOR THESE PEEVES

Following are the top five e-mail pet peeves in the workplace. Avoiding them will make your e-mail messages more effective.

1. Carrying on sensitive conversations via e-mail.

Sensitive and emotionally charged conversations have no place in an e-mail. If you need to fire some-one, express disappointment, or apologize, do it face-to-face (most preferred) or via phone. When a topic has emotion behind it, the recipient naturally escalates that emotion when reading the e-mail.

Why? Because it is virtually impossible to display emotion in an e-mail (aside from some carefully placed emoticons - which not everyone appreciates), and humans by nature look for the worst in a message rather than the best. So your innocent question of "Why did you call Mr. Smith?" gets read as an accusatory question, as if you had asked, "Why on earth did you of all people call Mr. Smith and bother him?"

Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that many people write things in an e-mail that they would *never* say in person. They view e-mail as a way to have "safe" conflict without being face-to-face. So they may snap back at someone in a sarcastic way or slam someone professionally or personally. Some people even enjoy this type of conflict, as it gives them a charge. The bottom line is that if your message has any type of intense emotion behind it, do not send the e-mail. The matter is best addressed in a face-to-face meeting or phone call.

2. Using "reply all" versus "reply."

Just because you were one of many recipients on a message does not mean everyone needs to hear your reply.

For example, a supervisor may send a group message out to the entire department asking who will be present at the quarterly meeting. The only person who needs to see your response is the person who initiated the message, not the entire group. If the group contains 100 people and each one does a "reply all" saying, "I'll be there," you will have a very cluttered inbox and 100 annoyed people.

Therefore, really think about who needs to see the message before you reply. Obviously, if your com-pany requires that you do a "reply all" for business e-mails, then by all means do so. Otherwise, use the "reply all" button judiciously.

And remember this: with a "reply all," everyone, even someone who was in the BCC line, will see your comments. So you never really know who is getting your message.

3. Using poor grammar and spelling.

A typo every now and then is not a big deal. However, consistent bad grammar and spelling is obnox-ious. E-mail is a form of written communication, so respect the written word. Additionally, in business everything you do, say, and write is a reflection of your professionalism.

When people read your messages, they naturally - and automatically - make a judgment about you based on your writing. If your writing is poor, everything else about you is in question. After all, if you do not care enough about your writing, what else do not you care about? Your product? Your service? The reader?

Just consider that the written word stays out there forever; no e-mail message is ever really deleted per-manently. Make sure your lasting impressions are good ones - even when you e-mail.

4. E-mailing complicated information.

If you have to give someone technical, detailed, or complicated information, do it with a phone call and an e-mail as a backup rather than relying solely on the e-mail communication. E-mail is best suited for short messages that do not require a lengthy response.

If your e-mail is more than a couple of paragraphs, pick up the phone and talk to the recipient. Use the follow up e-mail to send needed documentation or a recap of your verbal instructions, but do not expect people to read and act upon a lengthy or complicated message.

Additionally, if you are the recipient of a detailed message and need time to work on the reply, do send back a short acknowledgment message that states, "I received your message and am working on the needed items." If the reply requires real discussion, then pick up the phone and talk about it. Do not rely on e-mail for every topic.

5. Writing bad subject lines or not using subject lines.

Unless you are doing e-mail marketing and relying on your messages to sell people, use straightforward subject lines that reflect the true theme of the message. Leave the cute and clever wording to the marketers.

For day-to-day business purposes, plain and direct work best. So rather than have a subject line that reads, "Want to pick your brain," write, "Need your input on the Jones project."

Realize, too, that many people use their e-mail as a filing system, and they rely on the subject lines to find key information later. So if all your subject lines are vague (as in "A message from Tom Smith" or "Info you requested"), or if you do not use subject lines, people will nott know what the message was about when they search their files later.

So always write detailed subject lines, as in "Dates for Singapore conference" or "Files for Smith project." And should the e-mail's subject change as the conversation ensues, then *change the subject line* to reflect the new theme.

GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

E-mail has certainly come a long way in the past couple decades. What was initially viewed as a novel way to share key information in the 1990s now often is the preferred method of business communication.

But remember, just because something is commonplace and expected does not mean you can become lazy with it. Always use e-mail properly and for the purposes and subjects it was intended. By doing so, not only will you avoid these pet peeves, but you will also gain productivity rewards as you enhance your professional reputation.

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