

Enlightened E-mail Communication

Just a few short years ago, e-mail was hailed as a means of revolutionizing business communication. And while many of us still view e-mail as an essential lifeline that connects us to our network of colleagues, clients and friends, some people are starting to feel a little disillusioned about electronic communication.

We've all heard the stories about bosses and clients who delete unread e-mail unless they recognize the name and subject line (or who simply refuse to read or respond to e-mail). For the very powerful, this silent protest against electronic communication may be effective. But for those of us who still rely on e-mail to communicate, here's a few tips on how to make it as painless and productive as possible.



Composing Your Message

-  Think about what you want to say. E-mail is no guarantee of your privacy. Think of e-mail as an over-enthusiastic gossiper – whatever you say could be repeated!
-  If you're angry about something, feel free to write an e-mail, but don't send it until you've had a chance to cool down and review your message. This way, you've had a chance to vent your frustration, but you haven't jeopardized your reputation (or your career) by sending an e-mail written in the heat of the moment.
-  Sarcasm, veiled threats and some forms of humor just don't translate well in an e-mail. Avoid any nuances that aren't perfectly clear to the reader. Written communication always sounds harsher than the spoken word, so make sure you convey your message clearly. And don't fool yourself – emoticons are not a replacement for face-to-face communication.
-  Proofread your messages. Bad grammar and spelling mistakes make you look unprofessional. If you wouldn't send a letter written completely in lowercase, it's not ok to do the same thing in an e-mail.

Selecting Your Subject

-  Your subject line should be: Clear, concise and informative.
-  Be specific: If you're inviting someone to a meeting, your subject line should read "Meeting with Swiss Distributors: 13/8 4 pm." Not "Want to find out about more about Heidi's hometown?" The second option may be cute, but doesn't cut it in a business environment.

-  Make your recipient's life easy – include the required action in your subject heading. For example: "FYI only", "Important: action required immediately" or "Please review and respond by Friday" will help your recipient prioritize his or her e-mail without having to read the entire message.
-  Don't use vague subject headings. "Interesting Information" is just frustrating. "Competitive Review: Q4 2000" provides far more information.
-  Feel free to use colored fonts to highlight important messages. But remember the boy who cried wolf and don't overuse this feature.

To Whom It May Concern:

-  Don't cc the entire department on every e-mail you send. If it's not immediately relevant, this type of "FYI" e-mail is just distracting. Also, unless you're under explicit instructions to do so, don't cc your boss on all of your e-mails – it appears unprofessional and sends the message that you need to cover your actions.
-  Double-check the To, Cc and Bcc fields before you send your message. It might seem idiot proof, but it's easy to get distracted and send an e-mail to the wrong person.
-  Ban non-work-related company-wide messages. It may seem harsh but everyone will appreciate it in the long run. Cars for sale, solicitations for charity donations and information on new phone rates are not appropriate for the office e-mail system. Place these kinds of notices on the company bulletin board.

Replying

-  Before you click Reply, check the settings. Some e-mail programs will automatically reply to everyone, others will only reply to the sender. Make sure you specify which setting you need.
-  Don't send too many "thank-you" e-mails. If someone's really gone out of his or her way for you, a thank-you e-mail will be appreciated. If they've merely responded to a routine request, they'll appreciate the lack of clutter in their inbox. And if you receive a thank-you e-mail – don't send a "You're welcome" reply!
-  Delete the original text before replying – it just clutters up the message.
-  Keep the same subject heading when replying. If your message develops into an e-mail chain, it's easy to keep track if the subject headings remain consistent.

Follow these techniques and you'll be well on your way to clear, concise, clutter-free communication!