



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
*Achieving International Excellence*

# EMAIL ESSENTIALS

## *MASTERING NETIQUETTE AND EMAIL OVERLOAD*

UWA Human Resources

## EMAIL – A BLESSING! A CURSE!

Email has revolutionised workplace communication. Most of us could not imagine being without it, but at the same time it can be overwhelming.

By adhering to a few simple principles, however, we can make life easier for both ourselves and those with whom we are communicating. These rules are termed Email Etiquette or 'Netiquette'.

There are three good reasons to follow 'netiquette':

- ❑ *Professionalism* – by adhering to a common set of principles, internal and outgoing email from the University of Western Australia will convey a professional image.
- ❑ *Efficiency* – well written emails that get to the point are more effective and make us more productive.
- ❑ *Managing Risk* – writing emails that adhere to these principles are helpful in protecting staff and the University from legal action.

### The Limits of Email

Many of us feel that we get too much email. Fifty or sixty daily messages are not unusual; and reading and responding to email seems to dominate the daily activities of workers. According to one study 72% use email daily.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that some 66% of people admitted to responding to email messages without giving them proper consideration<sup>2</sup> and only one third of respondents considered whether it was the best, most productive, means of reply.

It is not unusual for email communications to go awry. Margot Katz reminds us that "Only 7% of our communication is actually the words we use – 38% is the sound of our voice and 55% is body language. Is it any wonder then that we so often offend without realising or we're misinterpreted."<sup>2</sup>

Email is best used is to exchange specific information aimed at distinct audiences, for routine or transactional matters where mutual interest, common understanding or context already exist. In other words, when verbal and non-verbal body language signals aren't important. Email can also compliment other communication channels; as a prelude to using a real-time medium like telephone or face-to-face, or as a discussion postscript such as meeting an information request already discussed. But don't use email to convey the unexpected and particularly not for bad news.

Efficient communication requires that we select the most appropriate channel. Talking with someone over the phone or face to face is frequently preferable to email. Yes, it means having to set up meetings or be available to answer the telephone. But by choosing the right medium you can cut the clutter and get to the issues faster.

### Netiquette – Making Email Work Better for You

In general, electronic etiquette is no different from etiquette generally – courtesy, respect and ethical behaviour is required in all good business communication. The 'netiquette' suggestions below should help you to use email effectively and appropriately.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Sending and Receiving the Message***

- ❑ *The Subject Line.* Use a descriptive subject line to clearly advise the recipient of the nature of the message. Restrict the topic to one main subject and include a file reference where appropriate. Consider changing the topic line each time; even if responding on same topic, do something to distinguish this email from the previous ones on the same subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Lia Timson, "Think before pressing the send button", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Toomey, "Emails a trap for the unwary", *The Australian*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008.

<sup>3</sup> There is a full discussion of the good management of email in Christina Cavanaugh, *Managing Your Email: Thinking Outside the In-Box*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New Jersey, 2003.

- ❑ *Distribution.* Avoid being a 'friendly spammer' by using CC, BCC and Reply All appropriately. If you have to 'copy-in' people to your email, ensure they clearly understand why you have chosen to do so. Put the recipient address in the email last – this averts the chance that it will get sent prematurely, or before you have had a chance to consider.
- ❑ *Forwarding or replying.* Take care not to inadvertently pass on confidential information or that which was only intended for a narrow distribution. If the email contains a conversation thread, check if it is necessary or appropriate to pass on the 'history'.
- ❑ *The Salutation.* Make your email personal by using the appropriate salutation in its business context and avoid over familiarity.
- ❑ *Timeframes.* Don't assume immediate receipt of your message. Allow time for a reply. Answer your messages as promptly as possible. If you anticipate taking some time to prepare a response let the sender know you have received their message and will get back to them, ideally providing a time frame.
- ❑ *Attachments.* Attachments, especially large ones, can be annoying. Only send when they are necessary.
- ❑ *Priorities.* What is the priority of your message? Avoid using urgent and important unless it is genuinely the case.
- ❑ *Read before sending.* Like any piece of written work edit your message to ensure correct grammar and spelling. F7 is the Outlook key for spellcheck, but remember that spell checkers cannot discern mistyped words. **Think before clicking 'send'!**
- ❑ Do not send a potentially contentious (emotionally reactive) email without sleeping on it. The 12 hour delay in sending could save many more hours of lost productivity in managing the unintended consequences. Just ask yourself the question: "Would I say this to the person's face?" or "How would I react to this?".

### ***Preparing the Content of Your Message***

- ❑ *Have a Purpose.* Ask yourself why the other person should receive the email. State the purpose in the first sentence and don't assume the recipient knows the background. Provide enough contextual information to let the reader know what the message is about.
- ❑ *Less is More.* Reading electronic text is more difficult than reading printed communications so brevity is important – although not so brief that the reader has inadequate information. Ideally cover only one key point. If the message doesn't fit onto one screen then consider setting up a telephone call or a meeting.
- ❑ *Language.* Avoid long sentences, preferably no more than 15 to 20 words. Use gender neutral language. In general, using the active not the passive voice improves readability.
- ❑ *Keep the Thread.* In order to avoid a lengthy email string, however, you may wish to focus your message by responding to particular quotes.
- ❑ *Choosing the Right Medium.* Don't labour over composing an email. This is usually a signal that a higher order of communication (ie telephone or face to face) is required. In fact, where the content is not straightforward it is best to avoid emails, if possible.
- ❑ *Courtesy.* Convey friendliness and be courteous in your message. Remember that the recipient does not have your body language to assess your tone. Avoid emotive language and make requests, not demands.

### ***Formatting the Message***

*Plain Text.* Use plain black text – it is so much easier on the eye.

- ❑ *Upper Case.* Avoid using all capital letters. This is considered email rudeness. Upper case should be used sparingly and only to emphasise an important point.

- ❑ *Layout.* Consider the structure and layout of your message. Use the white spaces to your advantage. Breaks between paragraphs make it easier on the reader. Short paragraphs and bullet points are more visually appealing and easier to read.
- ❑ *Emoticons, acronyms and abbreviations.* In general don't use emoticons<sup>4</sup>, and text message style acronyms and abbreviations.
- ❑ *Templates.* Use templates where appropriate.
- ❑ *Signature Block.* Create a signature block that provides the necessary information about you such as your position title, phone number and mailing address as well as your email address (your email in the address line may be useless once the email is forwarded or printed). Consider including your availability in your signature block (eg that your office days are Monday and Tuesday, or that you only view your emails twice a day. Advise recipients that if the matter is urgent they best contact you by phone.

### **What to Avoid**

- ❑ *Chain letters.* They are inappropriate in the business environment.
- ❑ *Illegal activities.* – harassment, defamation and pornography.
- ❑ *Printing.* As a general rule, respect the environment and don't print your emails.

### **What to Remember**

- ❑ *Stay within the law.* One of the reasons that email can be a legal minefield is a failure to take it seriously.

*Email... can constitute harassment or even defamation and expose people to serious legal action. ... Something like the circulation of a sexually explicit joke or a picture that is offensive to someone can be a problem because it can be construed as sexual harassment.*<sup>5</sup>

- ❑ *Consider also using a disclaimer at the bottom of your messages:*

*This email is confidential. If you are not the intended recipient you must not disclose or use the information contained within. If you have received it in error please return to the and delete any record of it from your system. The information contained within is not the opinion of the University of Western Australia in general and the University accepts no liability for the accuracy of the information provided.*

- ❑ *Privacy and Confidentiality.* If there are confidentiality and privacy issues consider whether email is the best medium of communication. A good rule of thumb is not to say anything you wouldn't write on the back of a postcard. Remember that copies of all email remain on University servers and that the recipient can forward the email.
- ❑ *Record Keeping.* Maintaining accurate records is part of the University's obligations under the *State Records Act 2000*. Capture appropriate information from email messages on official files. Regularly conduct email maintenance. See the *Archives and Records Advice Sheet 06 – Maintenance Checklist for Electronic Records*.
- ❑ *Personal emails at work.* Personal messages sent from the University can be regarded as official communications regardless of content. They could expose you and the University to unnecessary risk.
- ❑ *OHIO – Only Handle it Once.* In general don't waste time acknowledging receipt of emails. Send only one message. This also applies to phoning and emailing for the same item.

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<sup>4</sup> Symbols at the end of sentences to denote happy, sad and angry moods. Significant numbers of email users do not know the meanings of various emoticons.

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Toomey, "Emails a trap for the unwary", *The Australian*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008.

## **Are Your Email Habits Dangerous?**

It is becoming easier and easier to access email on the move through personal digital assistants (PDAs) like BlackBerrys. However there are downsides to this convenience that each of us needs to learn to manage.

### ***Work Life Balance***

The University values work life balance. Tools such as email make it easy to blur the difference between home and work. Try switching off your email when you are at home. As the Buddha says, "Be in the moment". When you are on holiday leave your email behind. Use an automated response message to let people know you are away and who to contact if their problem is urgent.

### ***Tyranny of the Routine***

Dealing with less than urgent emails crowds out the time needed for thinking about more strategic activities. Michael Bugeja of Iowa State University conducted a small personal experiment. He logged and coded his backlog of emails after returning from leave. 75% were routine, over 20% affirming and less than 5% disturbing. When he repeated the experiment a few months later, 85% were routine. He concluded "... email [was] not only setting my administrative agenda but also complicating it, adding an element of urgency that made routine problems seem like emergencies".<sup>6</sup>

### ***Conflict Management***

Email works well for certain purposes related to provision of fact-based information. It is inappropriate where emotions are in play and can contribute to protracted complaints resolution. As Michael Bugeja comments, email was "*never designed as a frame through which we decide personnel issues, file grievances, and share governance and opinions about governance, with others duly copied, complicating any hope of resolution. ... Email intensifies incivility because harsh or tactless language may come easily in virtual habitats with one party isolated at odd hours in front of a computer screen rather than face to face with someone during regular business hours. [and] in almost every case, resolution is achieved only through in-person intervention.*"<sup>7</sup>

### ***Concentration and Productivity***

*Discover* magazine cites a study<sup>8</sup> conducted at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London. The study found that a group of subjects who responded to instant messages while taking a test performed 10 points worse than those who completed the test without distraction. The study tells us something many of us have suspected for some time – many of us don't do our best thinking in front of a computer screen. What can we do about this? Strategies involve variations of pulling the plug. Bill Gates retreats to a cabin with old-fashioned print on paper for a week once a year. Others restrict their time on the computer to no more than an hour a day. Some organisations have instituted a policy of email-free Fridays. Even checking for new messages only once an hour can help.

Email – a blessing or a curse? Perhaps the choice is ours.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Bugeja, "The E-genda Stalks an Administrator on Vacation", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2006

<sup>7</sup> *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Steve Berlin Johnson, "How to cut through the info blitz and actually get some work done", *Discover*, November 22, 2005

## ***Tips and Traps***

There are always exceptions, but in general, follow these suggestions for good email communication:

### **Do**

Ask yourself if email is the best medium

Be concise

Maintain a professional tone at all times

Use email for routine, transactional information or to compliment other methods such as phone conversations

Keep the address list to those who need to know

Re-read, check before sending and don't send in the heat of the moment

Store and save emails only when necessary and file them efficiently

### **Don't**

USE ALL CAPITALS or **Bold**

Use 'SMS' abbreviations or emoticons



Send inappropriate material

Try to resolve complex issues or disputes through email

Seek to manage staff or grievances through email

Copy in more people than you need to

Pass on email communications to those for whom it was not intended

Use your inbox as your filing system