

Avoiding Tricky E-mail Situations

By BNET Editorial

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The immediacy with which e-mail has enabled people around the world to communicate with each other has great advantages—but also some real disadvantages. When we have little time to spare, we often feel under pressure to reply to e-mails as soon as they arrive in our inboxes, and this can result in all sorts of problems.

This checklist will help you deal with difficult situations that have been caused or made worse by e-mail, including sending an e-mail to the wrong person and replying in haste or anger.

What You Need to Know

I get so many messages that I haven't the time to read them all properly and still reply to them promptly. What is the best way to tackle this?

This is a very common problem. With all the demands we have on our time, it is too easy to misread e-mails, especially if they are badly written or unclear in content or layout. We all want to reply to messages promptly, but beware of writing back too quickly if you are not 100% sure what your correspondent is requesting or asking about. Use a staged approach to replying to e-mails: acknowledge that you have received the e-mail; request clarification if you need it; then reply fully only after you are up to speed with all the relevant information.

What to Do

Make Sure You Reply to the Right Person

If you exchange e-mail messages as a member of an e-mail group, take great care how you reply.

If a group e-mail annoys or exasperates you, resist the temptation to reply while you are still angry. Give yourself time to cool off. If you do choose to reply, reply to the entire group *only* if it is absolutely necessary. If you reply to just one person, make doubly sure before you send the e-mail that the addressee is the *right* person. For example, some of your correspondents may have similar first or last names, so check before you click "send."

Take special care if you reply to personal e-mails at work. There are horror stories about people who compose highly personal messages to friends or partners, but who inadvertently send the messages to everyone in their office address book or click on "reply to all" rather than just "reply to sender." This not only causes acute (and very public!) embarrassment, but also puts the writer on the firing line at

the office. More and more companies are making policies limiting personal Internet and e-mail use at work, so, if at all possible, send personal messages from a non-work account. And always take the time to double-check your recipient.

Be Very Careful When Forwarding Information

In the same way that you need to take care when originating or replying to an e-mail, you need to watch your step when you forward information to another person, especially if he or she is an external client or customer. As mentioned above, double-check that you are sending the e-mail to the right person.

In cases in which the thread of the e-mail conversation is quite long or in which you have been copied in for only a part of it, you might not realize that some of the interleaved comments or content are inappropriate for passing on. These comments could range from the relatively harmless (“I hope we wrap this up soon: the negotiation’s gone on for too long”) to the disastrous (“I hope we never have to work with these people again”).

Make sure you do not forward anything that comments unfavorably on the external party’s capabilities or judgment. Also double-check that there are no personal, offensive, or defamatory remarks (such as any that criticize appearance, or are racist or sexist).

Treat Confidential Information Appropriately

E-mails have been described as electronic postcards—their contents can be easily read by anyone—so be certain you read through external e-mails before you send them to make sure you have not inadvertently included confidential or sensitive information.

If you do need to send confidential information by e-mail, you can include it as a password-protected attachment.

Know your company’s policy on confidentiality and security. It should set out what employees can and cannot send by e-mail. It will also set out the disclaimers or warnings that should be included in every e-mail.

When E-mails are Sent in Error, Act Immediately

Despite your best efforts, at some time (especially if you have an extensive mailing list) you may write or send an e-mail to the wrong person. In many cases, this may be perfectly harmless, but, if the information is confidential or is critical of the accidental recipient or his or her company, you may have a problem.

Many companies put a disclaimer on all outgoing e-mails saying that the information they contain is intended for the recipient only. The disclaimer might also say that the information is confidential. But the damage is done the moment you click “send,” so you need to act quickly.

If you have sent a potentially damaging e-mail by mistake, contact the recipient as quickly as possible, either by phone or by e-mail.

If the material is confidential, ask the recipient to destroy it securely.

If the e-mail contains critical or offensive remarks, apologize and offer an explanation. Do not try to make too much of a joke of it—jokes often do not travel well online.

Try at the first opportunity to prepare your manager or boss by explaining what happened and when. The other party might wish to make a complaint or the situation could escalate beyond your control. You may find this embarrassing, but in the long run it will save time and help to put a “lid” on the situation. Your objective is to resolve a potentially problematic situation as quickly as possible, with minimal damage and inconvenience.

What to Avoid

You Don’t Read Your E-mails Carefully Before Replying

If you receive large numbers of e-mails daily and are under time pressure, you might think you are saving time by scanning the messages for key words and then replying. In some cases this will be fine, but in others it will get you off on the wrong foot. If it is an important message it deserves a well-considered reply: send an acknowledgment, then reply properly when you can dedicate more time to writing a great e-mail.

You Involve Other People in an Argument

“War by memo” has now evolved into “war by e-mail.” The practice of sending copies of communications to as many people as possible in order to impress or embarrass may have become much simpler with e-mail, but it is still as much a waste of time, energy, and inbox space as it was using memos.

If you have a problem with a colleague or client, write to that person directly. (A phone call, however, may be the best way to reach a solution, as the voice can convey nuances that e-mail will never be able to.) There is no need to copy in everyone on your team unless you have an essential business reason for doing so.

You Let a Difficult Situation Escalate

If you receive an angry or rude e-mail, you might be tempted to reply in the same tone, but this will just make things worse. Keep cool, be professional, and reply in measured language. If you feel that you may have been rude already and have ground to make up, apologize to your correspondent.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

A Beginner's Guide to Effective E-mail, webfoot.com: www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html

Emailreplies.com: www.emailreplies.com

Tiger Computing Ltd: www.tiger-computing.co.uk/email.pdf

"Top 10 e-mail mistakes," ibiztips.com: www.ibiztips.com/email31AUG00.htm and www.ibiztips.com/email04SEP00.htm