

Getting the Most from E-mails

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E-mail has revolutionized global communications; it allows you to exchange information with colleagues, customers, and suppliers quickly and easily, 24/7.

Friends and colleagues commonly use e-mail to share all types of data—text, photos, audio files, or video clips.

Recently, it was estimated that more than 65 billion e-mail messages are sent daily, but we haven't yet tapped into its full potential in the workplace. Also, we still aren't sure how best to manage our e-mail; we're often at the mercy of an overloaded inbox. This e-mail addiction manifests when you feel an urge to stop everything to attend to it, when you constantly check your inbox for news messages, or when e-mail conversations interfere with your ability to get your "real" work done. For example, suppose you make a careless remark to a colleague via e-mail. It could beget an endless volley of clarifying messages, create ill will, and reduce productivity. In the worst-case scenario—say by sending an off-color joke—you could face disciplinary procedures or even legal action. It is important to learn how to write effective e-mails.

E-mail is definitely here to stay. It is fast, efficient, and cost effective. What you need to know is how to get the most from it.

What You Need to Know

How can I get people to respond to my e-mail with a sense of urgency?

First, if the message itself doesn't convey the importance of an immediate response, don't use an "urgent" flag. It will annoy the recipient. Remember, everyone wants his or her e-mails attended to and each person deserves the same consideration. Be patient. If your message is important it will be handled appropriately. If you need something attended to immediately but the recipient doesn't understand that, call the person and talk about it. The irony about e-mail use is that people are using it to replace the telephone. Don't fall into that mindset. Give the recipient more lead-time to respond to your request before the matter becomes urgent for you. On the other hand, the message may in fact be time-sensitive for the recipient and you might want to include language to the effect of "if I don't hear from you by [insert date and time], I'll assume it's okay for me to make the decision." At least in that way, the recipient only has to reply if he or she wants to participate in the decision. You've made the timeframe clear, given the person a chance to reply and shown the individual you have considered his or her input.

How can I get control over my own compulsion to respond to every e-mail immediately?

We have come to a point where people do expect immediate attention as a matter of course. Naturally, you can moderate your responsiveness depending on who the sender is and follow the chain of command to determine the level of attention you provide. That still may not help, however. Some people are now designating a time of day or day of the week as “e-mail duty” and send an auto-reply to everyone who contacts them that they will respond only during those designated times. Others are so overwhelmed that they send an auto-reply telling senders that if the matter requires immediate attention, or needs a response earlier than in two days, they should telephone. If you know you need to do something about your response to e-mail, why not try each of these strategies and see what works for you?

What to Do

Improve Communications with E-mail

Contacting someone by phone, dropping in to his or her office, or in other ways making real person-to-person contact is becoming a thing of the past at work; it just takes too much time, and demands are popping up all around us. E-mail is becoming the communications method of choice. And it provides a record of all agreements thereby making misunderstanding, at least regarding objective data, rare. Even employees separated only by a thin office cubicle wall depend on e-mail to handle the quick and routine aspects of sharing work related information, managing schedules, and reminding one another of appointments.

Compare the time it takes to communicate by e-mail with the time it takes dialing telephones and leaving messages, or spending time with all the preliminary chitchat on the phone, or sitting around waiting for meetings to start. E-mail makes all that a breeze but it is less effective and sometimes cumbersome if you need to discuss detailed or complex issues.

E-mail is now the most convenient way for companies to keep all employees informed about news, announcements, and other routine matters relevant to everyone. Internal communications processes are also less expensive when conducted with e-mail. One message to all employees can take just minutes to create and distribute.

Increase Interpersonal Effectiveness

E-mail is great for team collaboration. Conversations and documents can be shared instantly. It also saves time and the need for long meetings. If your team is dispersed, it also saves some travel

expenses by eliminating the need for more frequent gatherings. This saves huge amounts of time and money in the long run as long as communications are clear.

Unfortunately, all of the non-verbal cues and the spontaneous give and take of regular meetings are absent in e-mail communications. Messages need to be well crafted to convey, in writing, the right tone as one important way to make up for the lack of the intangibles.

Develop Better Customer Relations

E-mail is an important way to connect with customers and to communicate quickly about their needs and changes in products, service, pricing, and special offers.

E-mail will reduce the time it takes to respond to queries or correspond with customers but its ease also encourages more correspondence. The important point is to be sure to monitor and respond quickly to customer inquiries.

Limit Personal E-mail

Because e-mail is also so convenient at work, it is tempting to use it for personal communication. Whether taking care of chores that save yourself the need to take time off work (a good thing) or for social needs (not so good), it is hard to resist the temptation to use the company e-mail system. Many organizations now restrict personal use of both the Internet and e-mail because so many employees abuse the privilege. Some organizations have introduced “e-mail free days,” and an increasing number publish strict guidelines regarding the personal use of e-mail. At least 35 percent of large companies actually have someone monitoring e-mail and anything an employee looks at on the Internet. Not only is this about efficiency, it is also about corporate secrets being abused, and a concern about the legal responsibility for work conducted with company property and in the company’s name.

Be careful what you say in personal e-mails—they have the same legal status as a letter. Gossip could easily be misunderstood and create problems for you.

Know the Rules and Use E-mail Responsibly

When you’re writing business e-mails, keep your standards up, even if time is tight. You need to get to the point quickly (while still including all relevant information), check your spelling and grammar, and use the right tone for your correspondent. Avoid using slang and abbreviations as much as possible and also keep your temper: because it is so easy to create and send a message, it is common for people to fire off an inappropriate e-mail having misunderstood an incoming message. You’re your time and re-read a message before you reply. If you are really perturbed, draft a reply,

save it, do something else for ten minutes and then come back to it. Replying in the heat of the moment is never a good idea. In short, never send a business e-mail that you wouldn't want your boss to read.

Your employing organization may have an e-mail policy and writing guidelines, so check these out carefully. It may also include mention of legal requirements regarding the filing and recording of work-related e-mails and any conditions for the personal use of the e-mail system.

What to Avoid

You're Too Casual about E-mail Use

E-mail is a powerful form of communication and easy to use. Use the same degree of care that you would normally use in composing a letter, however, and keep your professional standards up.

You Use E-mail Excessively

One of the many benefits of using e-mail at work is the speed with which messages can be received and returned. The flipside is that many people send far too many messages, however, which can cause all manner of confusion, especially if e-mails start to cross. This will waste a lot of time as you try to unpick things, and is best avoided. Also, don't use e-mail when other communications tools are more appropriate; if you're engaged in negotiating, complex decision-making, or meeting an important contact, it's more effective to call someone or meet face to face.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Chan, Janis Fisher. E-Mail: A Write It Well Guide—How to Write and Manage E-Mail in the Workplace. Write it Well, 2005.