Email: what's ethical and what's etiquette?

The way we express ourselves in emails, writes Aubrey Warren, can produce powerful effects, both personally and organisationally.

Do your emails display your company letterhead?

One large organisation refused such a suggestion on the grounds that it would make their emails official and legally binding. But of course every email sent carries an invisible but real letterhead. All emails represent the organisation – as well as the individual – by whom they are sent.

It’s obvious, of course, but it’s also surprising how many people are beguiled by the apparent anonymity and informality of email. It’s a dangerous illusion compounded by the way we express ourselves in emails.

Too many email users don’t appreciate the hazards of email, including the risks presented by its limitations as a communication tool and the potential legal problems associated with careless use. Such dangers include:

- Defamation and discrimination as a result of emailed comments,
- Theft of intellectual property as a result of copying or forwarding material,
- Breaching confidentiality or privacy,
- Sexual harassment as a result of forwarding offensive material,
- Inadvertently entering into contracts, and
- Positive behavioural approaches that help support responsible and professional email use must include an appreciation of etiquette and ethics.

**Etiquette**

While email offers important advantages over other forms of communication, it does have its limits. It’s easy to assume our reader understands our meaning, but our own experience with others’ messages confirms that meanings are difficult to communicate at the best of times and more difficult when resources like nonverbal cues, tone of voice and immediate feedback are removed.

Research by Monash University’s Susan Yell has confirmed what we all suspect: that people are less conscious of the likely effects of their words when they confront people via email rather than face to face.

Etiquette and manners go a long way toward improving the quality of our communication because they are their own communication – conveying respect, attention and appreciation for the other person.

People who receive emails they interpret as critical can reread them over and over, building up their anger or
Dear Team Members

- Ensure you are familiar with and abide by the company policy,
- Never forward emails that may be perceived as derogatory, discriminatory or in poor taste,
- Avoid using email for confidential materials,
- Don’t be a cyber-coward – deliver bad or uncomfortable news personally wherever possible, and
- Don’t make claims, offers or judgments in emails that you aren’t prepared to back up.

Regards,
Ron
CEO

frustration. Even if their interpretation of an email message is inaccurate, the nature of the medium doesn’t allow for the same immediate checking and clarification of, say, telephone or face-to-face communication.

Good email etiquette requires treating the communication exchange with respect. For example:

- Before copying or forwarding information, ask whether you have permission to do so or whether you would want the information forwarded if you were the author,
- Addressing the recipient by name and then introducing the topic rather than launching into the topic at the point you’re at in your own thinking,
- Not displaying recipients’ addresses in large distribution lists,
- Not identifying every message as “urgent” or “high priority”,
- Providing a clear, specific, succinct and informative subject line,
- Using plain English, and
- Not using all caps (it equals shouting).

To save the embarrassment of pushing send as soon as you’ve finished a draft of a message (and then realising the message is incomplete, inappropriate or in need of editing), leave the address blank until you’ve completed the message and proofread it. This gives you a chance to catch mistakes or tone down confronting language before pushing “send” – think of it as a “cooling-off period”.

Ethics

The ethical and legal hazards for email users are legion.

Forwarding messages without permission can violate copyright; blind copying recipients without informing the identified recipient is dishonest and breaches trust; circulating messages that denigrate other people or organisations may be defamatory; casual assertions, reassurances or affirmations may be interpreted as endorsements or agreements.

An example of this is an insurance company in the UK which had to pay half a million pounds to a rival company as a result of false rumours about its competitor’s solvency circulated on email by several employees. The employer was pursued because they were deemed to be vicariously liable for the acts of their employees.

An email policy makes a sensible starting point organisationally. But just having a policy isn’t enough. An Australian mining company stood down 40 people for sending and receiving internet porn, activities that were in breach of its email policy. But the union argued successfully that the policy hadn’t been consistently enforced and so the workers were reinstated.

Email policies must be properly introduced and enforced. Sound ethical email behaviour should include the following:

- Ensure you are familiar with and abide by the company policy,
- Never forward emails that may be perceived as derogatory, discriminatory or in poor taste,
- Avoid using email for confidential materials,
- Don’t be a cyber-coward – deliver bad or uncomfortable news personally wherever possible, and
- Don’t make claims, offers or judgments in emails that you aren’t prepared to back up.

Creating positive organisational email practices and experiences involves developing positive behaviour around etiquette and ethics. Positive email behaviour in these areas helps ensure email is a useful, effective and safe organisational communication tool.