

## **E-mail Etiquette Revisited**

**By Christina A. Cavanagh**

In the past several months, I've been contacted by a European-based technology firm, a large American insurance company, a branch of the U.S. military and a major Canadian bank with a common plea – how do we solve our e-mail problem?

On an individual level, a publishing executive confided that their e-mail system was down for 24 hours and the employees didn't know what to do with their time. Another executive told me they handed in their Blackberry because it is too time consuming to manage e-mail remotely.

People are tired of seeing workplace e-mail used as the wrong way to communicate. In previous studies I've conducted, coping with message volumes was a key stressor in e-mail use. Now, we aren't more accepting of volumes, we're just reacting differently. There is a cumulative impact in constantly dealing with the same inane issues that we tend to underestimate such as cc's, replies-to-all, over-use of distribution lists, thank you's and acknowledging e-mail receipts. E-mail misuse is wearing us down by degrees. So how are we coping with messages of mass annoyance?

One survey respondent took the direct approach – he would send back an unnecessary message with “s.s.s.” in the subject line. When the original senders who usually called and inquired as to the meaning of the new code, they were politely told “stop sending s—t”. It seemed to work for a while, but there were always a sea of new users to deal with, and a career in the balance. We have to be mindful in the ways we push back on workplace e-mail.

Quoting other fatigued respondents, “e-mail gives people the ability to send you trivial information” and “I have a rule of 4 – after 4 emails, you pick up the phone.” A contributing cause of e-mail fatigue is our flagging expectations regarding appropriate e-mail use. When we don't see improvements around us, we just give up. Yet, our e-mail system has become a critical tool of production in the white-collar workplace, leading to another level of fatigue – apathetic workplaces where organizations don't appear to take any tangible action to stop the flow of unnecessary messages. In the words of a senior executive, “Thanks to e-mail, organizations have lost their way in what they think their employees can actually absorb.”

In our highly electronic workplace the desire for conversation has not abated and in fact should be the saviour of poor e-mail use. It's not the length, but the weight of the message that should determine the delivery method – in person, telephone or e-mail. The desire for non-electronic communication is not only human, but also efficient. We need to act much more on our intuitive sense that a conversation makes more sense and costs our firms less in time spent.

There is still a firm perception in North American workplaces that people are hiding behind e-mail and purposely avoiding any direct contact. This is almost equally balanced

by people who prefer e-mail so they can avoid the unproductive practices of engaging in personal conversation. Add to this that more people are using e-mail to keep an electronic audit trail of their requests and activities, and we have an e-mail paradox – avoid vs. talk, talk vs. time, time vs. record. It's no wonder the lines have become so blurred as to best e-mail use.

We're also spending more time and effort trying to decipher electronic message content. The e-mail may be short and well-written, but it doesn't answer our original inquiry. This usually happens when people are attempting to multi-task their communications – e-mailing while in other meetings or on the telephone. [I wish I could just tell people to stop this – it would improve efficiency and message clarity dramatically]. The sender is forced to launch into another more detailed message, spending much more of their time to clarify an already clear message because the recipient isn't paying enough attention. Or worse, a detailed message is sent, but the recipient only reads the first two sentences and calls you at the office wanting to know about the very situation you have already responded to – these are classic communication abuses caused by people who are reactively skimming from channel to channel.

There are ways and means to deal with our daily barrage of messages, minimizing our susceptibility to e-mail apathy and improving our own approach.

#### **To reduce low-value messages**

Have a purpose: For each e-mail you want to send, ask yourself why the other person should receive it. Don't justify nonessential e-mails by saying, "Oh well, if they don't want the information, they can just delete it." Most of us already get a dozen or more of these types of e-mails everyday – we'd appreciate a break from the delete key.

Don't be a "friendly spammer": Be judicious in your use of large-audience functions like reply-to-all, and distribution lists, which are highly efficient ways to send the same message to multiple parties, but also the most common form of workplace spam that clogs our inboxes. If you must send, do it to specific individuals on a need to know basis only.

Make CC stand for Conscious and Caring: If you absolutely have to "copy-in" people to your e-mail, make sure that they clearly understand why you have chosen to do so. You can do this either through mention within the message itself or in advance with prior agreement. This takes more time than simply pressing send, but so should anything worthy of communication at work. Don't waste a colleague's time in trying to manage your messages or intent.

#### **For improving communication**

Fall back on phones and face time: Talking with someone over the phone or face to face is frequently a better, more effective mode of communicating. Yes, it means we have to set up meetings or be available to answer the telephone, which on balance may seem less efficient. But ask yourself if you have ever closed a deal or achieved a similar profitable

result solely by electronic communication? The idea here is to choose the right medium that helps you cut the clutter and get to the issues faster.

**Push back gently:** You wouldn't intentionally insult or denigrate a coworker face to face, would you? Then don't do it electronically through a poor choice of words. When using e-mail, always default to being polite - make requests, not demands. This also holds true when you are asking someone to take you off their distribution list or e-bulletin or to not send anymore jokes. It's easy enough to let our annoyance show through, but much better to be firm and to the point. This usually assures that your name will be peeled off the offending lists.

**Do some advanced planning:** It's too easy for us to create and send low-impact messages that set us up for email ping-pong. We're so pressed for time that our emails end up as quick bursts of thought rather than composed requests. Unfortunately, these often lead to another round of messages trying to clarify the initial request. Show the electronic channel the respect it deserves by taking a few moments to be succinct with the first message and save time in the total transaction.

**Don't overload messages:** This is the reverse of the low-impact message, where you receive albeit a succinct request that demands a significant change in your scheduled activities, usually within the next 24 hours. These messages can feel like time bombs. It's not the content that creates the pressure, it's the surprise element generated. We expect to deal with sudden shifts in our daily routines, but we operate under the security that we'll be personally advised of such a circumstance. This permits an opportunity for quick discussion and/or change of game plan. The email at 10:00am that advises you without prior warning or discussion to facilitate an important conference call at 3:00pm creates unnecessary tension and stress. Don't use e-mail to convey the unexpected.

### **For your protection**

**Guard your privacy:** Curb the urge to give out your e-mail address, just because you are asked. It is perfectly acceptable to ask why someone wants your e-mail address and how they're planning to make use of it. It's also perfectly acceptable to lay down ground rules for what types of messages you don't want or expect to receive.

**Do a check on your sending practices:** Your gentle weekly or monthly e-mail reminders to association members, business clients, employees or prospects may actually serve to drive business away from you. It's better to ease up on the messages, and target the right people with the right information at the right time. Yes, this is also more work for us up front, but in the long run you will get much better results because receivers will stop auto-deleting your canned mass messages, and may actually start reading some of your more selectively targeted ones.