

## Company Intranet Blog

### Minding your Ps and Qs – the basics of email etiquette

In the two decades since email began saturating American workplaces, most people have come to agree on some basic email rules, such as avoiding “yelling” at someone by typing in all-caps. Yet, according to research, many professionals still regularly violate basic rules of email etiquette.



As customers and co-workers alike spend less time communicating face-to-face, and more time interacting electronically, it's estimated that the average US employee spends about a quarter of his or her time at work combing through hundreds of emails each day. Good email etiquette requires that you exercise good manners, and treat others as you would have them treat you – even when interacting through a computer screen.

#### **Do unto others when sending email**

Effective emails in the workplace are usually short – consisting of just a few short paragraphs or a bulleted list of details. They're also crystal clear about what you'd like the recipient to do: approve something, offer input, take action or simply review the information. Since they can't be taken back, email messages should be well thought-out and proofread for clarity before you hit “send.” Just as important as what you say is how you say it. It can be hard to read tone in an email when there are no vocal inflections or facial expressions to convey emotions and empathy. In fact, a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* reports that people misinterpret the meaning and tone of emails as much as 50 percent of the time. Making matters worse, 90 percent of email recipients incorrectly believe they can correctly interpret the tone of an email message! This disconnect results in communication gaps that can lead to misunderstandings and frustration. Bottom line: no matter how you feel about the people you're communicating with, or the contents of the message, go out of your way to be upbeat and polite. Read your emails before sending and adjust the tone when necessary to convey the correct intent.

#### **Email etiquette DOs and DON'Ts**

Practicing good email etiquette helps you stand out in a world of impersonal communication and shows that, no matter how busy you are, you can be counted on to meet the needs of your customers and co-workers. Here are a few DOs and DON'Ts to help you communicate politely and effectively via email:

**DO: Reply – no matter what.** Don't let mail pile up in your inbox without acknowledging its receipt. If no particular response is required, just say "thanks." If you own an action item, but can't get to it immediately, let the sender know that you saw the message, and provide an estimated timeframe for your reply.

**DO: Respond within 24 hours.** Senders view email as an instantaneous medium, so responding to an email within 24 hours is considered the norm.

**DO: Proofread every message.** Your mistakes won't go unnoticed by the recipients of your email, and, depending upon the recipient, you may be judged for making them. Don't rely on spell-checkers. Read and re-read your email a few times, preferably aloud, before sending it off.

**DO: Keep the subject line current.** If an email's subject diverges from the original topic over the course of a long thread, update the subject line. The subject line should always succinctly identify what you are writing about to make it easier to refer back to the conversation later.

**DON'T: Wait to respond to an email until you know the answer.** Here's what often happens: you receive an email asking for some information that you won't have until next week. You add the task to your to-do list, and put the email aside, without ever letting the sender know your plan. Meanwhile, the sender is left wondering whether you received the message and why it's taking so long for your reply. Over time, you'll create a reputation for being non-responsive. It only takes 10 seconds to send a quick email stating that you're working on your response and providing an ETA.

**DON'T: Reply if you're on the cc: line.** There are exceptions to the rule, of course -- but the cc: line indicates recipients who are receiving the information as an FYI. Unless someone specifically invites you into the conversation, let the folks on the "to" line sort things out.

**DON'T: Assume that you don't need to respond.** Here's an example: a co-worker sends an email to both you and your boss, asking a straightforward question that either of you could answer. Don't assume that you should defer to your boss because of seniority. Instead, chime in! Your boss will likely appreciate you handling the query.

**DON'T: Cherry-pick only the questions you want to answer.** Avoid the bad habit of responding only to the issues you want to deal with, while leaving other questions unresolved. It's best to address each question or issue, even if it means acknowledging you don't know the answer. This prevents the sender from continuing to ask you the same question, over and over, in search of a reply.

