

E-mail etiquette at work, by Monte Enbysk, Microsoft.com Small Business Center

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What does your e-mail say about you as a manager?

A lot, says David A. Owens, clinical professor of management at Vanderbilt University's Owen School of Management. It provides a window into your workplace status, work habits, stress levels, even your personality, he says.

Owens is an organizational behavior guru who can analyze an anonymous piece of e-mail and tell you the sender's likely corporate rank and seniority level.

"Higher status" managerial e-mails have a level of formality, tone and lack of detail that is less apparent at mid-management levels and below, he says. Cheesy quotes, smiley faces and joke mails are more prevalent at lower management levels, where correspondence is more task-based and e-mailers allow themselves to let off steam.

E-mail is an extremely valuable communication channel for today's managers, but it can be abused if used carelessly or too much, Owens says. Here are 10 basic tips for better e-mail use and management.

1. Use e-mail as one channel of communication, but not your only one. It's fast and easy. It can document discussions. It enables high-impact messages to be sent around the world with the click of a mouse. But it also misleads bosses into thinking they can manage large groups of people through regular group e-mails, Owens says. Use e-mail wisely, but don't manage your company through it. You won't reach everybody you need to reach and your presence won't be felt.
2. Keep it short and sweet and don't allow e-mail threads longer than a football field. Know that e-mails longer than one screen-full often aren't read right away; they get shoved to the end of the day or the next morning. Know also when it's time to put down the mouse and go talk to someone, or pick up the phone. There comes a point when further e-mailing eats up time unnecessarily.
3. De-code your messages as much as possible. Say what you really want to have happen. Start with the subject line: Make it clear and compelling (and be willing to change it when the subject in a thread changes). Be certain about who really needs to be on the "to:" and the "cc:" line. Be clear about action items and priorities. Spell them out, as lists or bulleted items. Include a response button or some other mechanism if you must know that everyone has read and understood your message.
4. Encourage people to respond with questions. That's akin to keeping your office door open.
5. Save your wrath for face-to-face meetings. "Flame mails," or e-mails dripping with criticism or venom, often backfire. Terse e-mails, because they are not accompanied by the writer's facial expression or body language, can easily come across more harsh than intended. You control the message -- and the emotions on the other end -- much better by delivering it in person or over the phone.
6. Likewise, inject humor, but keep emoticons, smiley faces and joke mails to a minimum. The smiley faces do help clarify when you are being facetious. But too many facetious mails will erode at your attempts to write serious ones. What about joke e-mails? Some companies forbid them. Send them or pass them on at your own risk, Owens says. There is usually more downside than upside, but everybody needs

a good laugh now and then. Again, too many joke mails will erode your attempts to send serious ones.

7. Consider setting a 5-minute buffer between when you send and when it goes out. Both Owens and Maureen Dolan Rosen, a human resources consultant, see value in managers being able to retract poorly written messages before they even go out. "A 5-minute rule won't hurt anyone," Owens says. In Microsoft Outlook, you can delay the delivery of messages for a specified time through the "Rules Wizard." If you're angry when you're about to write, take a step further. Get up and walk around or do something else before you write the mail.

8. Work in time each day to answer your e-mails, or get help. If you can't keep up during a normal day, build time into your work day or delegate some of the responsibility. When is it too late to respond to someone? Never. Just make sure you have a good explanation.

9. If you can't write e-mails effectively, get some training. Or at least get help from a secretary or subordinate. E-mail should have some role in your communication with employees, partners and others -- there is really no valid reason to avoid it. But know that any remote workers and others who don't see you regularly may judge you largely on your e-mails.

10. Use spell-check -- and a thesaurus. Avoid typos and mangled sentences. They make you look bad. Avoid clichés, too.