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E-mail etiquette: 13 key steps to success

According to wiki.answers.com, more than 42 million of the Earth's population use e-mail. How amazing! Even more amazing is the number of e-mails we receive that are poorly worded, say too much, are difficult to understand, contain grammar and spelling mistakes, have an unclear subject line, or worse yet, no subject line at all. I could go on and on.

As with other technology, there seems to be a growing trend to abuse e-mail. Though it is an informal method

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of communicating, a number of basic rules of style do apply. Let's take a look at a "baker's dozen."

1. E-mail is not a vehicle for lengthy treatises. Messages should be direct, concise and succinct. This way, the probability is high that your e-mail will be read, and you will receive a response in a timely manner.

2. Write descriptive subject lines. Use the subject line wisely to inform the reader why your message should be read as a priority among the other possible 125 messages he may receive that day.

3. Business e-mail greetings depend on the situation. A first name, Dear Mr. or Ms. with last name, or simply "Hi/Hello" are all acceptable, depending on how formal you prefer to be. As a rule, the manner in which you would address a hard copy letter, for example, Dear

Mr. Smith or Dear Jack, is the manner in which you should address e-mail.

4. The close of an e-mail message reflects the balance between brevity and intimacy with the recipient. Although a closing can contain just your first name, in more formal instances you may want to use the same format as regular correspondence. The use of "Sincerely, Best regards," or other such closings reflects overall professionalism. It's also a good idea to include your contact information as appropriate.

5. Do not get caught up in the traditional e-mail culture of abbreviating and using acronyms. E-mail in business is for clearly communicating. Abbreviations are distracting and confusing and reduce effectiveness.

6. Do not type in all caps. This can be perceived as shouting and is also difficult to read. Type in upper- and lowercase letters as you would in a memo or other piece of business correspondence.

7. Avoid making mistakes in grammar, spelling, sentence structure and punctuation. Numerous mistakes send a negative impression of you and your organization.

8. Only forward business-related messages. Jokes, quotes, stories, etc. are better saved for personal e-mail. It can be very time-consuming to have to scroll through a lot of superfluous forwarded e-mail.

9. You can use emoticons such as "smilies" when trying to convey a tone of voice, but use them sparingly, and never in formal e-mails.

10. Read and reread your e-mail before sending it or, as the saying goes, "write once, read twice." In fact, your

proofreading will be more effective when you do it from a hard copy versus your monitor. Use your system's spell checking option in addition to proofing for content.

11. Once you have exchanged e-mails with a person on a given subject, it is generally okay to leave greetings out of your follow-up e-mails. In addition, it is also a good idea to trim back or delete older messages when sending a response so as to keep your overall message size from getting too large.

12. Responses to an e-mail should be within at least 24 hours and preferably within the same working day. If the e-mail received is complicated, simply send one back saying that you have received the e-mail and will get back to them shortly.

13. When communicating across time zones, if you send a message to which you want an immediate response, give the person a chance to get to work and login before assuming the e-mail did not arrive. And, in many situations, telephoning may always be your better option.

Consider carefully what you write. Remember, it's a permanent record, and could possibly be considered evidence in litigation, or even create a certain amount of liability for the company. Of course, e-mail is not the proper medium for confidential or extremely personal messages. Finally, always ask the question before you hit send, "Will this e-mail create a positive first impression of both me and my organization?"

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