Email Etiquette – Tip 18

Note: This is a revision to an article I originally prepared in response to a request by the Los Angeles Times on March 15, 2010, portions of which were used by them.

Communicating by email has effectively replaced mailing letters and sending printed memos in an office environment. It is not hard to understand why: It's quick and easy. There are some important issues about email protocol that can make your quick and easy email reflect poorly on you. Here are some does and don'ts you should consider before you click on the Send button:

- Reread your email before you send it. Make sure it says what you intended it to say and that it will be clear to the recipient.
- Avoid long copy. Recipients will not read lengthy emails.
- Always use spell-check before you send the message. Sloppy spelling will cause the recipient to wonder what else you might be sloppy about, such as the facts, your job, your respect for the recipient, etc.
- Grammar, punctuation, and capitalizing the first letter in sentences counts. The standard for email is the same as for a formal letter. You may not think it is important but the reader will form an opinion about you based on how you communicate.
- DO NOT USE CAPITALIZATION IN THE BODY OF YOUR EMAIL. IT SAYS YOU ARE SCREAMING AND IT IS TEDIOUS TO READ.
- Email is not the best way to communicate sensitive or complex issues or to deal with a conflict. It often creates confusion and can unintentionally make the situation worse. Have those conversations by phone or face to face.
- If you criticize someone or a decision someone made, offer a solution, a possible way to overcome the problem, or suggest how the issue could be handled more effectively in the future. Always assume the person you are referring to will read your email.
- Don't copy others on emails unless they have expressed an interest in receiving one. No one will appreciate you adding to the overload in their email inbox. Use a need-to-know approach instead.

Using an employer's computer at work for personal activities

Checking personal email, paying your bills online, and surfing the web while at work shows a lack of personal ethics and opens you up to potential criticism from others. Co-workers may notice that you are doing personal activities on your computer and may not realize that you are "off-the-clock" for a break or lunch. The gossip mill will spread the word and opinions will be formed about you without your knowledge.

Your personal access IDs and passwords, along with a history of the websites you have visited, will remain on the computer you use and may be viewed by the IT department if they are monitoring employee's usage of their computers. Since you won't know what information they will know about you, having access to your personal login details may not be in your best interests.

An occasional email regarding personal issues that are important, such as those regarding your children, a sickness or injury of a family member, would probably be accepted by most employers as reasonable. Unless your employer has expressly indicated what personal use is permitted, you should avoid using your work computer for any personal tasks.

Using an employer's computer remotely

If you use your employer's laptop or notebook remotely at home or when travelling, have a clear understanding with them about what personal use would be acceptable and what personal information you should take care to remove when you've finished using their computer. If your employer has the ability to access the computer remotely to update programs and company files, they will have access to everything on it.

Before you return the computer to your employer, delete your browser's history and all cookies.

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