



On the Web, email will often be your first -- or indeed, your only -- point of contact with other people, in many organizations and businesses it is now the de-facto communication method, both internally and with external bodies.

The formality of email in most businesses can vary between that of an interoffice memo down to a telephone call. Although most people give careful thought to the contents of anything written down on paper, most emails are composed with much less consideration, but can be even more permanent than paper (just think.. how many *really old* emails are still in your mailbox?)

But it can be the day-to-day emails that cause the most problems, the offhand remarks and unguarded comments, thoughtless turns of phrase and careless wording. Care must be taken both when you send email, and when you interpret it. Don't jump down someone's throat if there's a chance you have misinterpreted what they are saying.

This document presents some simple guidelines for electronic mail etiquette or Netiquette. It does not try to mandate any particular style or rules: it is instead an attempt to highlight important issues which affect the clarity of the electronic mail we send. After all, electronic mail is about communication, so clarity should be our goal.

Why do you need email etiquette?

- ▶ **Professionalism:** by using proper email language your company will convey a professional image.
- ▶ **Efficiency:** emails that get to the point are much more effective than poorly worded emails.
- ▶ **Protection from liability:** employee awareness of email risks will protect your company from costly law suits.

What are the etiquette rules?

There are many etiquette guides and many different etiquette rules. Some rules will differ according to the nature of your business and the corporate culture. Below we list what we consider as the most important email etiquette rules that apply to nearly all companies.

This document contains 48 rules in no particular order.

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1. Be concise and to the point

Do not make an e-mail longer than it needs to be. Remember that reading an e-mail is harder than reading printed communications and a long e-mail can be very discouraging to read.

2. Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions

An email reply must answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions – If you do not answer all the questions in the original email, you will receive further e-mails regarding the unanswered questions, which will not only waste your time and your customer's time but also cause considerable frustration. Moreover, if you are able to pre-empt relevant questions, your customer will be grateful and impressed with your efficient and thoughtful customer service. Imagine for instance that a customer sends you an email asking which credit cards you accept. Instead of just listing the credit card types, you can guess that their next question will be about how they can order, so you also include some order information and a URL to your order page. Customers will definitely appreciate this.

3. Use proper spelling, grammar & punctuation

This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of your company, it is also important for conveying the message properly. E-mails with no full stops or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text. And, if your program has a spell checking option, why not use it?

4. Make it personal

Not only should the e-mail be personally addressed, it should also include personal i.e. customized content. For this reason auto replies are usually not very effective. However, templates can be used effectively in this way, see next tip.

5. Use templates for frequently used responses

Some questions you get over and over again, such as directions to your office or how to subscribe to your newsletter. Save these texts as response templates and paste these into your message when you need them. You can save your templates in a Word document, or use pre-formatted emails.

6. Answer swiftly

Customers send an e-mail because they wish to receive a quick response. If they did not want a quick response they would send a letter or a fax. Therefore, each e-mail should be replied to within at least 24 hours and preferably within the same working day. If the email is complicated, just send an email back saying that you have received it and that you will get

back to them. This will put the customer's mind at rest and usually customers will then be very patient!

7. Do not attach unnecessary files

By sending large attachments you can annoy customers and even bring down their e-mail system. Wherever possible try to compress attachments and only send attachments when they are productive. Moreover, you need to have a good virus scanner in place since your customers will not be very happy if you send them documents full of viruses!

8. Use proper structure & layout

Since reading from a screen is more difficult than reading from paper, the structure and lay out is very important for e-mail messages. Use short paragraphs and blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number them or mark each point as separate to keep the overview.

9. Do not overuse the high priority option

We all know the story of the boy who cried wolf. If you overuse the high priority option, it will lose its function when you really need it. Moreover, even if a mail has high priority, your message will come across as slightly aggressive if you flag it as 'high priority'.

10. Do not write in CAPITALS

IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITALS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING. This can be highly annoying and might trigger an unwanted response in the form of a flame mail. Therefore, try not to send any email text in capitals.

11. Don't leave out the message thread

When you reply to an email, you must include the original mail in your reply, in other words click 'Reply', instead of 'New Mail'. Some people say that you must remove the previous message since this has already been sent and is therefore unnecessary. However, I could not agree less. If you receive many emails you obviously cannot remember each individual email. This means that a 'threadless email' will not provide enough information and you will have to spend a frustratingly long time to find out the context of the email in order to deal with it. Leaving the thread might take a fraction longer in download time, but it will save the recipient much more time and frustration in looking for the related emails in their inbox! The exception to this is when you have received a large email, in this case quote back the smallest amount you need to make your context clear.

12. Add disclaimers to your emails

It is important to add disclaimers to your internal and external mails, since this can help protect your company from liability. Consider the

following scenario: an employee accidentally forwards a virus to a customer by email. The customer decides to sue your company for damages. If you add a disclaimer at the bottom of every external mail, saying that the recipient must check each email for viruses and that it cannot be held liable for any transmitted viruses, this will surely be of help to you in court). Another example: an employee sues the company for allowing a racist email to circulate the office. If your company has an email policy in place and adds an email disclaimer to every mail that states that employees are expressly required not to make defamatory statements, you have a good case of proving that the company did everything it could to prevent offensive emails.

13. Read the email before you send it

A lot of people don't bother to read an email before they send it out, as can be seen from the many spelling and grammar mistakes contained in emails. Apart from this, reading your email through the eyes of the recipient will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate comments.

14. Do not overuse Reply to All

Only use Reply to All if you really need your message to be seen by each person who received the original message.

15. Mailings > use the Bcc: field or do a mail merge

When sending an email mailing, some people place all the email addresses in the To: field. There are two drawbacks to this practice:

- (1) the recipient knows that you have sent the same message to a large number of recipients, and
- (2) you are publicizing someone else's email address without their permission.

One way to get round this is to place all addresses in the Bcc: field. However, the recipient will only see the address from the To: field in their email, so if this was empty, the To: field will be blank and this might look like spamming. You could include the mailing list email address in the To: field, or even better, if you have Microsoft Outlook and Word you can do a mail merge and create one message for each recipient. A mail merge also allows you to use fields in the message so that you can for instance address each recipient personally. For more information on how to do a Word mail merge, consult the Help in Word.

16. Take care with abbreviations and emoticons

One problem with less formal email is *missed signals* - you can tell a lot from facial expression or gesture (in person), or by tone of voice (on the telephone). Irony or humor can be difficult to express in a mail message - many people get round this by using *smileys* such as :) to indicate humor - but not everyone knows what these mean, so they are not foolproof.

The most common smiley faces are probably these:

:-) or :)

A smiling face seen side-on; generally used to indicate amusement, or that a comment is intended to be funny or ironic ("`<g>`" or "`<grin>`" is also sometimes used).

:-(or :(

An unhappy face seen side on; generally used to express disappointment or sorrow.

;-)

A winking smiley face; usually indicates that something should be taken "with a grain of salt".

;->

A mischievous smiley face; usually indicates that a comment is intended to be provocative or racy.

There are hundreds of others; some more recognizable than others. Using the common smiley faces carefully can markedly improve the clarity of your message, since they convey nuances which approximate "body language". Like any embellishment, however, overuse of smiley faces destroys their value - use them sparingly.

17. Take care with rich text and HTML messages

Be aware that when you send an email in rich text or HTML format, the sender might only be able to receive plain text emails. If this is the case, the recipient will receive your message as a .txt attachment. Most email clients however, including Microsoft Outlook, are able to receive HTML and rich text messages.

18. Do not request delivery and read receipts

This will almost always annoy your recipient before he or she has even read your message. Besides, it usually does not work anyway since the recipient could have blocked that function, or his/her software might not support it, so what is the use of using it? If you want to know whether an email was received it is better to ask the recipient to let you know if it was received.

19. Do not ask to recall a message

Biggest chances are that your message has already been delivered and read. A recall request would look very silly in that case wouldn't it? It is better just to send an email to say that you have made a mistake. This will look much more honest than trying to recall a message.

20. Do not copy a message or attachment without permission

Do not copy a message or attachment belonging to another user without permission of the originator. If you do not ask permission first, you might be infringing on copyright laws.

21. Do not use email to discuss confidential information

Sending an email is like sending a postcard. If you don't want your email to be displayed on a bulletin board, don't send it. Moreover, never make any libelous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even if they are meant to be a joke.

22. Use a meaningful subject

Try to use a subject that is meaningful to the recipient as well as yourself. For instance, when you send an email to a company requesting information about a product, it is better to mention the actual name of the product, e.g. 'Product A information' than to just say 'product information' or the company's name in the subject.

23. Use active instead of passive

Try to use the active voice of a verb wherever possible. For instance, 'We will process your order today', sounds better than 'Your order will be processed today'. The first sounds more personal, whereas the latter, especially when used frequently, sounds unnecessarily formal.

24. Avoid using URGENT and IMPORTANT

Even more so than the high-priority option, you must at all times try to avoid these types of words in an email or subject line. Only use this if it is a really, really urgent or important message.

25. Avoid long sentences

Try to keep your sentences to a maximum of 15-20 words. Email is meant to be a quick medium and requires a different kind of writing than letters. Also take care not to send emails that are too long. If a person receives an email that looks like a dissertation, chances are that they will not even attempt to read it!

26. Don't send or forward emails containing libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks

By sending or even just forwarding one libelous, or offensive remark in an email, you and your company can face court cases resulting in multi-million dollar penalties.

27. Don't forward virus hoaxes and chain letters

If you receive an email message warning you of a new unstoppable virus that will immediately delete everything from your computer, this is most probably a hoax. By forwarding hoaxes you use valuable bandwidth and sometimes virus hoaxes contain viruses themselves, by attaching a so-called file that will stop the dangerous virus. The same goes for chain letters that promise incredible riches or ask your help for a charitable cause. Even if the content seems to be bona fide, the senders are usually

not. Since it is impossible to find out whether a chain letter is real or not, the best place for it is the recycle bin.

28. Keep your language gender neutral

In this day and age, avoid using sexist language such as: 'The user should add a signature by configuring his email program'. Apart from using he/she, you can also use the neutral gender: 'The user should add a signature by configuring the email program'.

29. Don't reply to spam

By replying to spam or by unsubscribing, you are confirming that your email address is 'live'. Confirming this will only generate even more spam. Therefore, just hit the delete button or use email software to remove spam automatically.

30. Use cc: field sparingly

Try not to use the cc: field unless the recipient in the cc: field knows why they are receiving a copy of the message. Using the cc: field can be confusing since the recipients might not know who is supposed to act on the message. Also, when responding to a cc: message, should you include the other recipient in the cc: field as well? This will depend on the situation. In general, do not include the person in the cc: field unless you have a particular reason for wanting this person to see your response. Again, make sure that this person will know why they are receiving a copy.

31. Remember to Say Please and Thank You

If you're asking for something, don't forget to say "please". Similarly, if someone does something for you, it never hurts to say "thank you". While this might sound trivial, or even insulting, it's astonishing how many people who are perfectly polite in everyday life seem to forget their manners in their e-mail.

32. Don't expect an immediate answer

Just because you don't get an answer from someone in ten minutes does not mean that he or she is ignoring you, and is no cause for offence. Electronic mail is all about dealing with your communications when you are able to do so.

33. Always remember that there is no such thing as a secure mail system

It is unwise to send very personal or sensitive information by e-mail unless you encrypt it using a reliable encryptor (i.e. PGP). Remember the recipient - you are not the only person who could be embarrassed if a delicate message falls into the wrong hands.

34. Include enough information

If you are sending in a question to which you expect a response, make sure you include enough information to make the response possible. For example, sending the message "My spreadsheet program doesn't work" to Microsoft Technical Support really doesn't give them very much to work with; similarly, sending the message "What has happened to my order?" to a vendor is also unhelpful. When requesting technical support, include a description of the problem and the version of the program you're using; when following up on an order, include the order number, your name and organization, and any other details that might assist in tracing your order - and so on.

35. Always provide a personal name if your mail system allows it

A personal name attached to your address identifies you better than your address can on its own.

36. Use a sensible personal name

"Guess who" or other such phrases are annoying as personal names and hinder the recipient's quick identification of you and your message.

37. If your mail system lets you use personal names in the addresses to which you send mail

This will often help a postmaster recognize the real recipient of the message if the address is invalid.

Example:

The address '12345@xxx.com' conveys less information than if it were written as '12345@xxx.com (Mary Smith)'

38. Try to match your message length to the tenor of the conversation

If you are only making a quick query, then keep it short and to the point.

39. Keep to the subject as much as possible

If you need to branch off onto a totally new and different topic then it's often better to send a new message, which allows the recipient the option of filing it separately.

40. Be very careful about including credit card numbers in electronic mail messages

Electronic mail can be intercepted in transit and a valid credit card number is like money in the bank for someone unscrupulous enough to use it.

41. Use some kind of visual indication to distinguish between text quoted from the original message and your new text

This makes the reply much easier to follow. ">" is a traditional marker for quoted text, but you can use anything provided its purpose is clear and you use it consistently.

42. Pay careful attention to where your reply is going to end up

It can be embarrassing for you if a personal message ends up on a mailing list, and it's generally annoying for the other list members.

43. Ask yourself if your reply is really warranted

A message sent to a list server which only says "I agree" is probably better sent privately to the person who originally sent the message.

44. Always use a signature if you can

Make sure it identifies who you are and includes alternative means of contacting you (phone and fax are usual). In many systems, particularly where mail passes through gateways, your signature may be the only means by which the recipient can even tell who you are.

45. Keep your signature short

Four to seven lines is a handy guideline for maximum signature length. Unnecessarily long signatures waste bandwidth (especially when distributed to lists) and can be annoying.

46. Basic rules for adding random strings

Some mailers allow you to add random strings to your signature: this is well and good and can add character if done carefully. You should consider the following basic rules though:

- Keep it short. The length of your quote adds to the length of your signature. A 5,000 word excerpt from 'your favorite author' used as a signature will not win you many friends.
- Try to avoid topical or local quotes, since they may be meaningless to recipients in other towns, countries or cultures.
- Variable signatures are usually best if they're amusing; polemical outbursts on politics or other such topics will turn most people off, but a one-liner that brings a smile can make someone's day.

47. How do you enforce email etiquette?

The first step is to create a written email policy. This email policy should include all the do's and don'ts concerning the use of the company's email system and should be distributed amongst all employees. Secondly, employees must be trained to fully understand the importance of email etiquette. Finally, implementation of the rules can be monitored by using an email management software and email response tools.

48. The Bottom Line

Above all else, remember that electronic mail is about communication with other people. When you compose an e-mail message, read it over before sending it and ask yourself what your reaction would be if you received it. Any time spent on making our e-mail clearer is time well-spent, so let's start taking the time.

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