DO'S AND DON'TS FOR
USING EMAIL AT WORK

Right and wrong ways to use a medium of communication that is unparalleled for sheer convenience, but carries many pitfalls and even dangers in the office environment

by Joan Lloyd

Don't substitute email for one-on-one leader communication

Use email for scheduling, routine updating, quick questions and other administrative efficiencies. Use the phone or face-to-face communication for everything else.

- E-mail is not a good tool for delegating (it leaves little room for dialogue and a lot of room for misunderstanding).
- E-mail is a poor tool for providing business updates (there are too many factors people may not understand and want to ask about).
- It is inappropriate for disciplining an employee (except as a follow up documentation).
- E-mail is not a good tool for coaching and providing feedback (there is too much that is lost).
- It is not a good tool for communicating sensitive information (Employees have been outraged when they were informed they didn't get a promotion, or their job was being redesigned. Believe it or not, some people have told me they were fired by email).

Email-or email distribution lists - don't take the place of team meetings and team communication

Some leaders — especially those who are less comfortable with groups — rely on email as their primary source of communication. While they may rationalize that it makes them more productive to communicate 24/7, their team suffers. There is an enormous value when the team can discuss issues and explore ideas together.

Sales teams discovered the power of the face-to-face meeting long ago. Even though a sales force is geographically scattered, the benefits of the sales meeting are clear and worth the investment. A team of operational leaders are more interconnected than sales staff and need to get together to make decisions that affect everyone.

Never deliver a negative message by email

"Your report is two days late. Why don't you have it in?" can be spoken with a neutral inflection or sound curious. But when seen in type, out of context, it may sound angry and demanding. Delivering a negative message is difficult, even when it is spoken face-to-face. Defensiveness is almost guaranteed when it's received by email. (*"What? He couldn't even pick up the phone?"*)

What's worse, email can be printed and saved. When I'm working with a client to repair a damaged relationship at work, both parties will often haul out their "documentation" to prove how the other party has wronged them.

Live by the 24-hour rule

If you receive an email that ticks you off, and your first reaction is to counterattack, don't. Close it and wait 24 hours before you respond. More often than not, you will calm down and figure out if you should go and talk with the person or at least word your email more carefully.

Once the volley of email hand grenades begins, the original intention or problem will become lost and the personal anger and sniping will become the focus. By the time you actually have an opportunity to see the person face-to-face, the damage will be done.

And people in an email war will save and copy others to cover their backsides. And since emails are so easy to edit and shorten, you never know if your words are going to be shown to people out of context. You've probably heard that unhappy customers will tell their horror stories to more people than a happy customer will. The same is true in an organization. By the time you're done, your words could be copied and forwarded all over the company.

Be more polite than when you speak

Because the tone and inflection are missing, it is more important to use friendly language, descriptive adjectives and carefully chosen words. It seems counterintuitive, I know. Email is supposed to be quick and simple. Aha! But that's what gets you in trouble.

If you don't consider how it will sound on the other end—and take steps to shape the delivery so the meaning is understood—you could be doing damage control later.

You're judged by your grammar and spelling—just as if you were writing a letter

When I get a sloppy email, with poor punctuation, misspelled words or written in lower case letters, it tells me the person just doesn't get it. They don't realize that what they write and how they write telegraphs their credibility to others. Like most people, I've made mistakes on my own emails, but I catch most of them by reading each email I write, at least once before sending it.

Write every email for your boss' eyes.

It's a great way to keep you honest and politically sensitive. Email feels private but it's anything but. Even though your manager won't be reading every email, you never know who will.

And because email is the property of the organization, it can be retrieved and reviewed by senior management, should they suspect a problem. I've heard countless stories about indiscretions resulting in terminations, once an investigation revealed misuse of email or the Internet. It leaves a trail that can nail you.

Stop the senseless cc

The flood of "cc's" (carbon copies-an archaic term that stuck) is nothing more than junk mail. Of course there are times when someone truly needs to know about the action taken or be looped in, but for those of you who send cc's just to CYA — stop!

When you're out of the office, set up an automatic response that lets people know you aren't responding to your email

The speed of emails has created an expectation of immediate response. When you don't hear back, you can feel frustrated or even snubbed. That frustration used to take a few weeks to develop when we sent letters by mail; now it takes minutes or hours.

Use free, online mailboxes as an alternative to your regular email address

This can be particularly useful if you are ordering online, emailing friends, or researching a personal subject. Not only is your communication kept from colleagues, their responses, or the junk mail that inevitably arrives, won't clutter your professional mailbox.