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OVERT AND COVERT CHALLENGES OF E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

The interest to the problem of e-mail communications is not occasional. Nowadays most offices have e-mail and Internet access as standard features. With these tools, you can not only talk electronically to everyone within your company, but you can also communicate online with people outside your organization. More and more people have computers in their homes and are able to send e-mail messages to their friends, family, and work associates. Now, when people ask for your address, they quite often mean your e-mail address.

Although technology has provided new means for person-to-person communication, it is not without pitfalls, and it has created many challenges for people as they do their jobs. This article **is aimed** at helping you understand how best to use e-mail and how *not* to use it when communicating on the job.

The solution of the aim claims for doing away with a number of certain **tasks**, such as:

1) to make good use of e-mail to enhance communications;

2) to avoid the misuses of e-mail;

3) to write e-mail messages that keep communications positive;

4) to observe general characteristics of arranging e-mails.

One of the major factors that have led to the popularity of e-mail is its speed and ease of use. Just type away on your keyboard, and in no time, you can send a short message to someone – a message that person receives soon after you send it. Using e-mail is much easier than writing a letter and putting it in the regular mail (or *snail mail*). As a result, e-mail can be a tool for many useful communication purposes, such as the following:

Sending interoffice memos

Written communication in the office is nothing new. Many workplaces used to live and die by the interoffice memo. Today, you can send memos giving news and announcements about business, personnel, and policy matters via e-mail. Type the message and hit the Send button, and you can reach as many people in the organization as you want, at one time – a much more efficient process for distributing the news than the old interoffice memo method.

Making requests

E-mail works well for making requests. Perhaps you need assistance on a project or you want to set up a meeting. People often respond quickly to these kinds of requests.

Making inquiries

Sometimes, the quickest and easiest way to find an answer to a question is to ask in an e-mail. If the inquiry isn't overly involved and doesn't require a great deal of explanation, e-mail is a handy communications vehicle for getting an answer.

Keeping in touch

Letters and cards aren't going away; they make for a nice personal touch in communications. On the other hand, e-mail enables you to drop quick notes to clients, staff in other departments, and other business associates. A simple here's-what's-been-happening-with-me, how-goes-it-with-you communication lets key businesspeople whom you may not see often know that you care about how they're doing.

Conducting routine business transactions

Some business relationships, such as customer-vendor ones, run under established processes. In such cases, e-mail helps transactions run efficiently. For

example, you (the customer) need so many parts from your vendor. The vendor tells you the price and when he can ship them, you confirm, and away you both go. When transactions and negotiations require little discussion, e-mail helps you exchange information and get the deal done.

Providing status and news

If you're a manager who, for example, has salespeople in different locations or who oversees the work of field-service technicians – employees you don't have the opportunity to see very often – you can use e-mail to find out the status of their work efforts. If you want to keep your boss in the loop on your latest project or what happened with that important customer issue you tackled today, e-mail is a great option for passing on the news and highlights. These kinds of updates and status communications help keep fellow staff informed and can usually be handled via e-mail.

Recapping agreements and discussions

One of the best uses of e-mail is to reinforce verbal interactions, especially when decisions or agreements are made or when action items are established. Instead of leaving what you worked out in a meeting to your memory, you can recap these important points in an e-mail to team members. When minutes of meetings – the absolute essentials, such as decisions and agreements – need to be recorded, e-mail works well. By not leaving these important items to memory, you enhance productivity.

Seeking ideas

E-mail can be useful for generating ideas. Maybe you are working on an assignment or planning an event for which you need assistance in brainstorming ideas. Using e-mail to solicit this input, which often doesn't require a thorough discussion or a meeting, enables you to save time.

Giving simple feedback on others' work

Simple feedback means that the comments you write are not long, are not controversial, and have been requested. Many an occasion arises in which people want your feedback or thoughts on their plans, proposals, or other work. If that feedback doesn't require a great deal of explanation, e-mail can be a quick and easy way to pass along your comments.

Thus, e-mail can be an effective vehicle for sending and receiving various forms of news and information when live interaction isn't really needed.

Many of the problems connected with e-mail communication result from people using e-mail when they should be talking – and listening. E-mail is one-way communication and isn't usually live. You have less opportunity with written messages to be understood clearly than with live conversation because you can't use your tone of voice and body language to convey sincerity. In fact, on sensitive (or even some not-so-sensitive) matters, people often interpret your e-mail messages in a far worse light than you ever meant. Replying on e-mail when engaging in live conversation is more appropriate tends to increase the tug-of-war in working relationships.

To keep working relationships on a constructive level and to enhance productivity, here are some situations in which you should not use e-mail.

When you need to give constructive feedback on performance

There are two types of constructive feedback: positive feedback for good performance and negative feedback for performance that needs improvement.

Although positive feedback given in an e-mail message may be well received, it still has less impact and seems less sincere than feedback given in person. And the less frequently positive feedback is given in person, the less sincere any attempts at giving positive feedback seem.

The recipient of negative feedback often interprets that feedback as far worse than was ever intended, and may stew about what was written. When the feedback is given via e-mail, the receiver doesn't have the opportunity to discuss the matter and

work out solutions. Verbal, face-to-face communication allows the giver of feedback to explain his or her messages and to help the other person understand them, as they were intended, and then to listen to and understand the recipient's perspective.

The nature of giving constructive feedback – positive and negative – is verbal and informal. It works best when it's part of a two-way conversation.

After your previous e-mail messages get little or no response

You may encounter situations in which your inquiries made by e-mail get no response, or your questions are met with partial answers. When you send follow-up messages, you still get little or no response. The reasons for this lack of response vary: disinterest in your issue, too many e-mails to pay attention to yours, poor follow-through skills. Just because you think that you write the message clearly doesn't guarantee that the receiver thoroughly reads and acts on it.

Continuing to send follow-up e-mail messages after a couple of tries may turn you into an irritating pest and give those who want to ignore your messages even more reason to do so. Instead, talk to the person to find out what has happened and determine when you can get an answer to your inquiry.

Although reaching the person, either by phone or in person, may take a few attempts, it's well worth the effort. The truth of the matter is that only live conversation can get an unresponsive person to respond.

When you address sensitive issues

Suppose you have a co-worker who wants to act on an idea that you know from experience will lead to problems, or you have reservations about your boss's proposal for a business change, or you've received a message from a customer who is unhappy about service. In these kinds of circumstances, attempting to share your feedback, thoughts, or feelings via e-mail often exacerbates an already touchy situation.

With e-mail, you don't have a chance to listen to what the other person is thinking. When you choose one-way communication to communicate about sensitive

matters, you increase the risk of misunderstanding and tension, which is the opposite of what you are trying to achieve.

When you want to elicit support and understanding for important changes and initiatives

Organizations are going through so much change that, in many companies, change is the only constant you can count on. Written communications can help reinforce announcements and updates about changes or new initiatives, but as the sole communications for these matters, e-mail messages can create anxiety.

Only live and ongoing face-to-face communication about significant changes helps get people on board. The chance to explain the company's rationale, answer employees' questions, seek input and involvement, and address concerns is lost when this kind of communication is handled by e-mail. Rumour and innuendo – key ingredients in resistance to change – often fill the voids that are created.

When you need to resolve concerns and conflicts

If you want to aggravate a conflict attempt to address it in an e-mail message. Trying to resolve conflict via e-mail is one of the major abuses of e-mail communications.

New terms from this technology have entered into the communications arena – *flaming e-mails* and *nasty grams*. A *flaming e-mails* or *nasty gram* is an attempt by one party to voice a concern to another party through an e-mail message that's harsh in language and tone. What often results is that the other party, hurt by the nasty gram, shoots one back through e-mail. Then, as the terminology goes, the *flame war* is on as the warring parties send negative e-mail messages back and forth – sometimes copying others on them as well. All this negative communication escalates tensions and brings no resolution to the conflict.

Voicing concerns and expressing disagreements involving strong opinions – which is what conflict is – through e-mail messages tends to be interpreted as far

worse than you ever meant it. Attempts to address conflicts in this way come across as hiding behind e-mail – a passive-aggressive form of communication approach. The only tried-and-true method for resolving concerns and conflicts is live, person-to-person interaction – face-to-face or by telephone when you and the other person are in different locations. Technology can't do it for us.

If you find yourself getting worked up or rewriting much of what you want to say when you are drafting an e-mail, you shouldn't send that message. If you have an important issue or problem that involves a high degree of emotion, go directly to the source to talk and listen – the assertive approach.

You are to stay on the right track when writing e-mail, i.e. you are to use care when communicating your messages via e-mail. Here are a few tips that will enhance rather than hinder your electronic communication:

Go for short instead of long in your messages. The same adage applies with e-mails as it does with office memos: If you write more than a page, nobody wants to read it. In other words, the shorter your message, the more likely people will read and comprehend it. If you find your e-mail exceeding a page in length and you can't edit it to be much shorter, paste the information into its own document, attach the document to your e-mail, and use your e-mail message to briefly introduce the information in the attachment. In most cases, you want to stick to short e-mail messages.

Make your points directly and concisely. Get to the point and say what you need to say as briefly as possible. Give the highlights (not all the details) and make the point relatively simple (rather than rambling). Go with the main point first and give supporting information next as needed. Verbosity in writing creates more confusion and less interest than face-to-face conversation, where at least you have the chance to adjust your message and help your listener understand it.

Keep your language constructive. Say – or rather, write – your messages in the best way possible. Keep the words respectful rather than harsh. Avoid anything that sounds blaming or threatening: "You didn't do what you said you would do" or "If you don't do this, I won't do that for you." Also avoid words that can trigger negative reactions, such as *always, never,* and the not-words (*don't, won't,* and *can't*). Here are a few such examples:

- *"You always forget to follow the procedure."*
- *"That idea won't work."*
- *"We can't do that on such short notice."*

In many cases, you can rephrase your message to be more constructive. And in some instances, you may be better off talking to the other person rather than sending an e-mail. The idea is to keep your language straightforward and to focus on the issue rather than the person. Say what you mean while sounding matter-of-fact and positive.

When people use all caps for some or all of an e-mail message, others interpret it as shouting at them. Stick to the standard practice of using caps only at the start of your sentences.

Watch the humour. Having a sense of humour is a great attribute, especially in the workplace. Displaying that humour is much harder to do in writing than it is in person-to-person interactions, where you can gauge how the other person is reacting to what you are saying. The receiver of an e-mail message may interpret your attempts at clever wit as biting sarcasm.

If you can add an occasional light-hearted touch to your e-mail messages, it's great. The key is to focus on the content rather than the delivery.

Off-colour jokes and ridicule are offensive to readers of your e-mail. Even if you think the other person wants to read the risqué joke you are forwarding, such messages can be forwarded to others via e-mail. Sending off-colour or demeaning e-mails – even in jest – generally invites more trouble than fun.

Write for your audience. As you do when speaking, consider whom you are addressing when sending an e-mail message. Understand who your audience is. If they respond best to brief highlights, keep the message short and sweet. If they like details, give them explanations. If they speak in technical terms, use the jargon they understand (and vice versa – keep the language in lay terms when your audience does not know the jargon). Keeping your audience in mind helps you keep your messages clear, concise, and respectful.

People sometimes copy others in conflict situations, which can stir up negative energy around the office. Upper-level managers often receive too many e-mail messages as it is and don't need more messages about matters in which their involvement isn't really needed. In addition, the other party in your discussion becomes aggravated by the move to notify others who aren't involved in the matter – sometimes this is viewed as a violation of confidentiality, too. And when other people are copied on the news, they may get involved (sometimes referred to as *butting in*) and make the situation worse.

If you see the need to copy others on an e-mail message that contains potentially sensitive information, make sure the other party or parties you dealt with on the issue agree that the need exist. Very simply, you should avoid other people's time and attention with unnecessary e-mail.

Voice mail is another form of technology that has become a big part of people's daily communication on the job. *Voice mail,* the verbal message you leave when someone doesn't answer the telephone, is often a much more efficient way to leave someone a phone message than to relay it to a receptionist, a secretary, or any other live person. You can say what you want without wondering whether the other person wrote down your message, let alone your name, correctly.

Using voice mail is like using e-mail. It works best when its purpose is to make a request, briefly share news, or pass on basic information. It does not work for

raising concerns or addressing issues of a sensitive nature. Venting on voice mail, for example, tends not to increase understanding or excite others to help you. Voice mail can be used to request a discussion but should not be used to present details about an issue.

Like e-mail, voice mail is one-way communication and doesn't work when two-way interactions are needed. Also like e-mail, the shorter your voice mail messages, the better. Briefly tell the other person the nature of your call and what the individual to do, such as call you back, and then make sure that you slowly enunciate your name and phone number. Repeating your name and phone number helps the person you are calling write down and double-check your information. The faster you say your number, the less likely the recipient will understand it and return your call.

Second to grammatical correctness, achieving an appropriate BUSINESS STYLE may be the biggest problem for the writer of business correspondence. A sure sign of an inexperienced writer, in fact, is the obvious attempt to sound too "businesslike", e.g.:

As per your request, please find enclosed herewith a check in the amount of $16.49.

Such expressions as "herewith" and "as per" contribute nothing to the message while making the letter sound stilted and stiff.

The first step, then, to writing successful business correspondence is to relax. While business correspondence will vary in tone from familiar to formal, it should sound natural. Within the limits of standard English, of course, you should try to say things in a "regular" way:

As you requested, I am enclosing a check for $16.49.

If you resist the temptation to sound businesslike, you will end up being more business-minded. The second version of our sample sentence is not only more personal and friendly; it is more efficient. It uses fewer words, taking less time to write and type as well as read and comprehend. One should plan to eliminate some words and expressions from the business writing vocabulary, such as *according to*

our records, acknowledge receipt of, at hand, on hand, attached please find, beg to inform, duly, for your information, hereby, heretofore, herewith, along these lines, deem, favour, etc.

While striving for a natural tone, you should also aim for a positive outlook. Even when the subject of your letter is unpleasant, it is important to remain courteous and tactful. Building and sustaining the goodwill of your reader should be an underlying goal of nearly any letter you write. A simple "please" or "thank you" is often enough to make a mundane letter more courteous. Instead of *"We have received your order"* you may try *"Thank you for your recent order."* Saying "We are sorry" or "I appreciate" can do much to build rewarding business relations.

On the other hand, you must be tactful when delivering unpleasant messages. NEVER accuse your reader with expressions like "your error" or "your failure". An antagonistic letter would say:

Because you have refused to pay your long overdue bill, your credit rating is in jeopardy.

A more diplomatic letter (and therefore one more apt to get results) might say:

Because the $520 balance on your account is now over ninety days past due, your credit rating is in jeopardy.

Because the second sentence refrains from attacking the reader personally (and also includes important details), it will be read more receptively.

A word of caution is necessary here. Some writers, in an effort to be pleasant, end their letters with sentence fragments:

Looking forward to your early reply.

Hoping to hear from you soon.

Thanking you for your interest.

These participial phrases (note the -ING form in each) should NOT be used to conclude a letter. There is never an excuse for grammatical flaws, especially when complete sentences will serve the purpose well:

We look forward to your early reply.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you for your interest.

Courtesy and tact are sometimes achieved by what is called a "you approach." In other words, your letter should be reader oriented and sound as if you share your reader's point of view. For example, *"Please accept our apologies for the delay"* is perfectly polite. But *"We hope you have not been seriously inconvenienced by the delay"* lets your reader know that you care. The "you" approach does not mean you should avoid "I" and "we" when necessary. When you do use these pronouns, though, keep a few pointers in mind:

1. Use "I" when you are referring to yourself (or to the person who will actually sign the letter).

2. Use "we" when you are referring to the company itself.

3. Do not use the company name or "our company", both of which sound stilted.

A good business letter must be well organized. You must plan in advance everything you want to say; you must say everything necessary to your message; and then you must stop. In short, a letter must be logical, complete, and concise.

When planning a letter and before you start to write, jot down the main point you want to make. Then list all the details necessary to make that point; these may be facts, reasons, explanations, and so on. Finally, rearrange your list; in the letter you will want to mention things in a logical order so that your message will come across as clearly as possible.

Making a letter complete takes place during the planning stage, too. Check your list to make sure you have included all the relevant details; the reader of your finished letter must have all the information he or she will need. In addition to facts, reasons, and explanations, necessary information could also entail an appeal to your reader's emotions or understanding. In other words, say everything you can to elicit from your reader the response you'd like.

On the other hand, you must be careful not to say too much. One mistake is order and, therefore, the impact of your letter if you end with *"Thank you once*

again." You should strive to eliminate redundant words and phrases from your letters. For example:

I have received your invitation inviting me to participate in your annual Career Conference.

Since all invitations invite, the words *inviting me* are superfluous.

Another common mistake is to say *"the green-coloured carpet"* or *"the carpet that is green in colour"*. *Green* is a colour, so to use the word *colour* is wordy.

Adverbs are often the cause of redundancy, e.g.: *If we cooperate together, the project will be finished quickly. Cooperate* already means work together, so using the word *together* is unnecessary.

When one word will accurately replace several, use the one word. Instead of *"Mr. Kramer handled the job in an efficient manner"* say *"Mr. Kramer handled the job efficiently."*

Of course, as you exclude irrelevant details and redundancies, you should be careful NOT to cut corners by leaving out necessary words, for example omitting articles and prepositions: *Please send order special delivery.* The only effect of omitting "the" and "by" here is to make the request curt and impersonal. The correct sentence is: *Please send the order by special delivery.*

When you use a computer terminal to communicate either inside or outside your organization, you should not abandon the basic principles of business writing. You should still strive for CLARITY, COMPLETENESS, CORRECTNESS, and COURTESY as you would in more traditional forms of correspondence. But when using electronic mail, there are a few additional provisions:

1.Keep your message short: You want your message to fit on one screen, whenever possible, thus keeping all important information visible at once.

DO use short phrases, abbreviations, and industry jargon known to your correspondent.

DON'T be so brief that your meaning is lost or your approach seems unprofessional.

2.Be sure your message is easy to answer: Let your reader know at the start what your subject is and what you want done.

DO ask questions that can be given a one-word response.

DON'T give lengthy instructions that require reader to leave the terminal or possibly clear the screen for information.

3.Beware of electronic eavesdroppers: Not only can your message be forwarded by the receiver or printed for others to read; it will also be stored in the computer's memory (even if you delete the message).

DO take advantage of the speed and efficiency of electronic mail.

DON'T send any message that could cast doubt on your character or capabilities.

Thus, e-mail is fast, user-friendly, and versatile. It is a prime medium of communication within businesses, and accounts for more and more external messages. It is necessary to follow the rules of "netiquette": use meaningful subject titles; be as brief as possible; distinguish business from nonbusiness mail; be selective in the recipients of your e-mails; avoid attaching extra files to your e-mail if you are mailing to a lot of people at once; never use obscene language or insults; pay attention to the linguistic peculiarities of e-mails.