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The finer points of e-mail etiquette

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When Diane Darling's frustrated e-mail exchange with a co-worker in Australia was inadvertently passed on to a boss, she found herself in the CEO's office.

"He handed me a copy of my e-mail and said, 'I just want to know your thoughts on this,' " recalls Ms. Darling, who had critiqued her manager. "It's something you hope happens in your 20s. Heaven help you if you do that later in your career!"

Like Darling, who wasn't fired but left the company shortly afterward, many employees have learned the dos and don'ts of e-mail the hard way. Some workers get tripped up by e-mail etiquette, or "netiquette." Others fall into a black hole of inefficiency because of ineffective electronic communication habits.

With the volume of e-mail growing rapidly, good e-mail skills have become more important than ever, some workplace experts say. For example: 1 in 10 employees spends more than four hours a day handling electronic missives; nearly half spend at least two hours, according to a survey of 840 companies conducted this year by the American Management Association and the ePolicy Institute.

Junk e-mail contributes to the problem. But another more deeply rooted issue is ineffective communication practices. Employees' poor writing skills cost American corporations \$3.1 billion annually in training costs, the National Commission on Writing estimated in a September report.

That's why companies - and individuals - are beginning to coach workers on how to use the medium effectively.

With upwards of 800 e-mails pinging her inbox daily, Sharon Clay would be overwhelmed if she didn't focus on efficient e-mail techniques with laserlike intensity.

"People should go through their e-mail in the morning like calisthenics," says Ms. Clay, an architecture manager at Nvidia Corp. While she offers one-on-one e-mail coaching, her Santa Clara, Calif., company, which makes graphics and digital-media chips for computers, has begun holding e-mail training classes for employees.

Clay suggests that workers go through their in-boxes methodically and thoroughly every morning, and more often if necessary. Being predictable in one's response time is an essential part of being a good communicator, she adds.

Here are strategies Clay and others employ to handle the electronic flood:

- **Don't forget the phone.** If your e-mail has more than three points or questions, you're probably better off calling or meeting someone, when you can tailor the discussion based on his or her answers.

- **Create an alert system.** Use color-coding, fonts, and styles to prioritize your inbox. These visual cues enable you to recognize and respond to critical e-mails quickly. Lower-priority items can be moved into folders to be dealt with later. Clay combs through most of these folders at least once a week..

- **Remember your grammar.** It's not just a courtesy; it ensures clear communication - and may determine your business success. Half of all companies surveyed by the National Commission on Writing took an employee's writing skills into account when making promotion decisions. So while it may save you time to leave out nouns and use cryptic abbreviations, don't do it. It can confuse co-workers. Also, use clear and concise subject lines.

- **Watch whom you copy on e-mails.** Make sure your recipients have the necessary context to understand an e-mail or exchange of e-mails. If not, write a quick summary or add some clarification. Taking these steps will also help when referencing archived e-mails.

The corollary is also important, as Darling found out when her e-mail got passed on to her employer: Don't send sensitive information to someone you can't trust to keep it confidential. E-mail "is an excellent technology," says Darling, now a networking consultant in Boston. "It's just so often misused."

Admittedly, all of this can be difficult to keep track of. Some companies have stepped in with software that analyzes employees' communication patterns and identifies when they're using e-mail unproductively, says Andrew Wolff, vice president of products at DYS Analytics in Wellesley, Mass., a software company.

More advanced software can also identify employees who violate company policies by using e-mail for personal reasons. Some 30 percent of total workplace e-mail is personal, according to some estimates.

Bottom line? E-mail guidelines should be written into company policy and enforced with software that can monitor e-mail and instant messaging records, says Anthony Sanchez, vice president of marketing at Waterford Technologies in Irvine, Calif. "Everybody's problems boil down to education, policy, and enforcement," he says. "We can't really change the people until there are policies that are going to be enforced."

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