BY JEFF DAVIDSON

MANAGING E-MAIL

Practices that promise relief

Despite ever-sophisticated e-mail software with dazzling features and spam filters, managing the daily e-mail beast is becoming more difficult. Certainly, vital messages received in the course of the day or week merit a significant allocation of resources.

While e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, and all other forms of electronic communication take the place of face-to-face interactions, special deliveries, and meetings, all of those functions —as convenient and critical as they might be—do not represent a substitute for you taking control of your activities and time.

Here are useful guidelines on managing e-mail:

Avoid sending complaints by e-mail. If you have a complaint or grievance, it's best to phone it in. There are subtleties in your voice that can't be conveyed by e-mail. Also, you don't know when and where someone might retrieve your message, and depending on the level of your dissatisfaction, he or she might take things totally out of context.

If you receive a complaint from an e-mail correspondent, get on the phone and try to quickly resolve the issue. If you respond by e-mail, you might be lucky and resolve the issue then and there, or you might incur a long trail of messages back and forth that, after considerable effort, finally equal the same solution that you could have devised over the phone in a matter of minutes.

Use e-mail only during the workday. People resolutely believe they need to be on call all day. This means addressing e-mails that come in after hours and on weekends. Most senders don't expect you to respond as soon as you receive the message; they simply were getting the issue off of their proverbial desks.

By responding during the workday and avoiding messages that arrive after hours and on weekends, you can train your frequent correspondents as to when you actually will reply, and their expectations will align accordingly.

Use meaningful and coherent subject lines. Avoid words that spammers frequently use and keep the subject line as short, relevant, and understandable as possible.

"Yes, let's proceed with the ABC project" is perfectly suitable, for example, because it gives the recipient a quick answer, identifies what the topic is about, and alleviates your need to have an extended response in the message area. On the other hand, "Re:," "Forward:," or such cryptic subject lines as "The issue is not one easily resolved" are not nearly as helpful to recipients.

Some people argue that maintaining the same subject line back and forth creates a trail and proves to be effective for both parties. But is it? Sending e-mails with clear and enhanced subject lines as a situation unfolds helps keep order.

Stay on focus. It's tempting to want to combine multiple issues within a single e-mail. However, single-focus messages, particularly when there's some level of complexity involved, are preferable. For maintaining clarity of issues, for filing purposes, and for long-term productivity, one issue per correspondence trail works best.

Avoid attachments. If you can, avoid attachments particularly to first-time correspondents. When you can, offer the message within the message area. You have a higher probability of it being read. People are leery of attachments, especially ones with large byte counts.

Proofread, proofread, proofread. A fair amount of slack is allowed in the transmission of e-mail messages. Your grammar doesn't have to be the King's English; you can have typos and spelling errors. Still, a proofread message is superior to one that is not.

Remember: Your e-mail is not private. From news accounts, we know that nothing sent using the Internet is private. A host of federal government agencies, as well as private corporations and Internet providers, can tap into your private correspondence with tremendous ease.

Facebook is not always your friend. Google has collected more information on you than you ever imagined. Everything that you do on the Internet can be captured and preserved for all eternity.

Use a reply-by-(date) folder. When waiting to hear about a particular issue, it's good to park such e-mail messages in a reply-by-(date) folder. Checking this folder allows you to quickly surmise who has been giving the answers you seek in a timely manner and who has not. Such a folder also provides an opportunity to send correspondents a gentle reminder that you await their reply.

Handle quick-response messages immediately. When a message requires a quick response like yes or no, go ahead and reply. This might seem like commonsense, but professionals often allow these messages to mount up. Then, even though each one would only take a minute or less to address, the accumulated burden of tackling them all looms large. Don't allow the buildup, and you'll forgo the issue altogether.

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