Email etiquette

Lee Cottier, 'Productivity Ninja' with specialist training and coaching company Think Productive explains how changing the way we write our emails can help team communication and productivity

Multiple studies of our email addiction agree – we're spending far too much time just managing our inboxes, and not enough getting on with our "real work". For some of us that can mean hundreds of incoming messages a day, and as much as two or three hours every working day spent just dealing with them[1].

All this is a massive drain on our attention, focus and energy, and a major barrier to being productive. As well handling our own bulging inboxes, how we each write the emails we send out is a major factor in the effectiveness of team communication and productivity. Making sure we attend to a few basic points of email etiquette is a good place to start.

Unfortunately many of us make poor use of subject lines when composing our emails. Writing clear subject lines is a sure-fire way to reduce the volume of emails that come back at you, as well as ensuring that the emails you send to others are clearly understood and quickly dealt with by their recipients.

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They're your chance to include a mini-summary of your message that your recipient can scan even without opening it, helping them to decide the nature, relevance and importance of your message. Ensure your subject lines are useful by writing your message first and then entering the subject line last to indicate its purpose and content.

As conversations grow we've all had our inboxes filled with screen after screen of useless subject lines like "Re: Re: Re: Fwd: Re: Fwd: What you said a week ago (but isn't what we're

www.five.sentences.es

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talking about now!)". Remember you are able (and allowed) to update the subject line of a conversation to make sure it continues to reflect the current focus of the thread!

For really short messages you can even send your whole meaning in the subject line – include a signal such as [EOM] ("end of message") at the end so your recipient knows they don't even need to open it. Another good one that helps keep email volume under control is [NRR] ("no reply needed").

The dreaded CC and BCC buttons make it far too easy to include too many people in on a message. Their overuse is a big cause of much of the excess volume of email that we see in so many offices. Before you send an email, think about who really needs to be CC'd in – remember every email interruption costs a colleague time, so decide who you need to bug versus who you can spare. You'll find that if you do this regularly, others will start to develop more respect for your inbox and your own time, too!

Are you guilty of copying in your manager (or even your whole team) on every step of a conversation/issue, when perhaps all they needed

to know about was the starting point, and then an update at the end? When you receive a message that's been sent to multiple addresses, resist the temptation to use "reply all" as the default "just so everyone knows what I've said". Perhaps only one person needs your reply? If you've got group mailing lists set up in your address book (perhaps for a particular project), remember to update them regularly – you may be sending messages out to people that they're no longer relevant to!

When writing your emails, keep it brief. Make your emails easy to digest, so each recipient knows why they've been sent them and what they are specifically being asked to do. Make good use of bullet points and lists, so it's easy for the key points and calls to action to be understood, rather than them getting lost in a mass of text and long paragraphs.

Avoid the common temptation to combine all your enquiries and questions for one person into one big email on the pretext that you "don't want to fill up their inbox" with lots of messages. In fact keeping communications for different issues/topics/projects in separate emails will make it easier for the recipient to decide what to deal with when, track follow-ups and handle conversation archiving etc.

www.five.sentenc.es suggests never using more than five sentences in an email – if you've got more to say include a link to background information, or put it in an attached document (or maybe even pick up the phone). That way, your five sentences

in the email can be devoted to describing the action required and is likely to be more clearly understood. Add 'www.five.sentenc.es' to your email signature to ensure that your colleagues hold you to the five sentence rule – or perhaps even give it a try themselves!

Surveys have shown that the average employee spends up to 40% of their time on email[1], so even getting slightly better at it both as individuals and as a team can be a huge productivity saving. Use the tips we've given on an individual basis, but also facilitate active discussions about email etiquette and standard working practices within your organisation – and ideally invest in some good training! ■

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[1] Radicati Group: http://bit.ly/lNfehE (PDF download)