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E-Mail Etiquette

Introduction

This document is intended to offer guidance/clarification to MORS members when using electronic correspondence. This is not a "how-to" document, but rather a document that offers advice to make you more computer-savvy (when it comes to e-mail communications) and to prevent you from embarrassing yourself and MORS at some point in the near future.



Studies show that knowledge workers spend about 20 hours a week doing e-mail . . . and one-third of that e-mail is useless. Worse, 70% of this e-mail gets handled within six minutes of arrival and the average worker is interrupted every three minutes. There certainly is a cost to our organizations. While we can't control what we receive from the outside, we can make some progress from the inside. Please help by reading this paper and taking action. Many thanks to Earl Hacker (CIO, WBB Consulting, Inc.) for providing access to some of this info. Much of this info was provided by Dianna Booher from an internet site (with some additional intentional humor and modification...).

Seven Things You Should NEVER Include in an E-mail

1. Negative comments regarding any MORS member. Too easy for someone else to forward accidentally. Use the phone if you feel so strong to discuss with anyone.
2. Performance criticism. Seems more "official" when spoken.
3. Classified or sensitive information. Given the "M" and the "O" in MORS, we must not overlook this area. Use common sense.
4. Racial or gender slurs. Enough said.
5. Sloppy writing. Your image and the image of MORS are at stake, even if you're hacking away on a Blackberry.
6. Sarcastic humor. Without inflection or visual cues, it's risky and subject to misinterpretation. Leave that practice to personal e-mail, not to official MORS business.
7. Private matters. Don't e-mail details on any part of your life that you wouldn't want to see in the newspaper. You never know where it may end up. Also, personal accomplishments, invitations, or requests of personal nature should not go to the MORS universe. Refrain from shotgun messages of private nature and send only to those individuals close to you that truly care and would share your interest.

To, Cc and Bcc

With only three choices for addressing an e-mail, i.e. the 'To', 'Cc' and 'Bcc' fields, you would think addressing would be trouble free. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

First, there are the users who have apparently no idea that the 'Cc' exists. Every address is listed in the 'To' even if the email is only directed to one person. In cases such as this, the receivers have little clue as to who should take action so either they all do something or they all do nothing.

Secondly, there are users who feel that every single e-mail should be copied to their entire address book whether it's relevant to those receiving it or not. These are the 'cry for attention' crowd. The addresses in the 'Cc' are for the people you are indirectly addressing. They are the FYI-ers or CYA-ers. Don't over do it here. Copy only those who need to be copied; not the universe.

There are users who never read the names of the people who receive a copy of an e-mail. They are the 'Did you see this?' crowd. For example, person X sends an e-mail to persons A, B and C. Then C immediately forwards it to A and B with the question 'Did you see this?' not bothering to see that X already sent A and B copies. The addresses in the 'Bcc' are like 'Cc' except that the addresses in 'To' and 'Cc' do not know that the addresses in the 'Bcc' are included in the conversation. The 'To' and 'Cc' addresses are blind to the 'Bcc' addresses. As you can imagine, use of the 'Bcc' is somewhat unethical and therefore its use is discouraged.

Reply To All



The 'Reply to All' button is just a button, but it can generate tons of unnecessary e-mails. For example, if we send a dozen people an e-mail asking if they are available at a certain time for a meeting, we should get a dozen replies and that's it. However, if each person hits the "Reply to All" button not only do we get a dozen replies, but so does everyone else for a total of 144 messages! We are not saying that the 'Reply to All' button should not be used. We are saying that it should be used with care. Please don't use it for useless drivel.

Don't Be A Novelist

Messages should be concise and to the point. Think of it as a telephone conversation, except you are typing instead of speaking. Nobody has ever won a Pulitzer Prize for a telephone conversation nor will they win one for an e-mail message.

It's also important to remember that some people receive (or send...) hundreds of e-mail messages a day (yes, there are such people), so the last thing they want to see is a message from someone who thinks he/she is the next Dickens.

Formatting Is Not Everything

Formatting can be everything, but not here. Plain text is it. Period. End of sentence.

Using HTML, or heaven forbid the Microsquish Rich Text Format, to format messages so that they have web links, fancy fonts, colors or whatever is asking for trouble. There are lots of e-mail clients (and some servers) which cannot handle messages in these formats. The message will come in as utter gibberish or in the worst case, crash the e-mail client. HTML can provide a cover for unsuspecting viruses. The virus will hide in the code and be initiated as soon as you open the e-mail in your browser review pane. You will have no knowledge of this attempt unless anti-virus catches it first.

If you absolutely, positively feel that it's good karma to use HTML e-mail, stick with the default fonts and simple formatting. Leave the colorful backgrounds, scripty fonts and animated images for your personal web site.

An alternative to web links is to just make the link not live – that is, go to the end of the URL and hit delete, taking out the hyperlink in the body of the e-mail. To distinguish a link from the rest of the text, an acceptable practice is to include it within brackets in this format: <http://www.mors.org> . This link is inactive but the user can highlight the text within the hard brackets and then copy-and-paste into the browser's URL section and hit return.

Most places are simply deactivating the active parts of the hyperlinks and leaving the text of the inactive hyperlink, rather than deleting the whole thing, because that is sufficient to avoid spoofed URL addresses (that is, where the visible address is not the one the active link goes to).

Signatures

A Signature in the form of print is a good idea. Please don't use a fancy picture since it comes across as an attachment and many users will be opening it by mistake.



We would also recommend including an e-mail address in this information. Sometimes it can be very difficult to locate the originator's e-mail address in the information that is part of a transmission, especially if it's going across the Internet.

Include originator's title and company name in the signature. Sometimes we run across a user's signature that contains a quote (as in "...the secret to life is that there is no secret.") after the person's name. This has become a fairly common practice. If you choose this option, the quote should be something that is a reflection of yourself. But . . . Keep it short. You don't want the quote to be longer than the message.

Attachments

For users on broadband or a direct connection, you should hold the limit to 5MB for attachments. HOWEVER, this is not a blanket recommendation to send attachments of this size. Even if a user is on broadband or a direct connection, there is no guarantee that their mailbox can handle it. With this small limit you can see that sending someone a 5MB attachment will quickly fill their mailbox and cause other e-mails to bounce.

Privacy, Are You Kidding?



Stop right where you are and set aside a couple of brain cells for the following statement: there is no such thing as a private e-mail. No matter what anybody says, states, swears or whatever, there is just no such thing as private e-mail. The reason?

Typically, an e-mail administrator has the ability to read any and all e-mail messages. Luckily your IT staff is honest and too busy to be nosy . . . but what about theirs?

E-mail software is like all software in that occasionally things go wrong. If this happens, you may end up receiving e-mail meant for another person or your e-mail may get sent to the wrong person. Either way, what you thought was private is not private anymore. Please don't think that trying to recall your e-mail will solve any problems. Tried that lately? It's normally too late, especially if you wait more than that six minutes. And don't forget about the individual who mistakenly forwards your bashing of a customer to that customer. This can be reduced by implementing Rights Management which may help prevent some these embarrassing problems. It will only work if you use it.

A Blessing And A Curse

E-mail is a conversation that does not require an immediate response (like a telephone). If someone calls you on the telephone, you pick it up (unless you have an answering machine, voice mail or you are just plain rude) and the conversation begins. This is an interactive conversation.

With e-mail you send a message and then wait for a response. The response may come in five minutes or the response may come in five days. Either way it's not an interactive conversation.

If a hundred people send you e-mail in one day, so what? You didn't have to talk with all one hundred. Just think of all the hello's, good-bye's and other unnecessary chit-chat you avoided. With e-mail you only deal with their messages (which usually omit hello's, good-bye's and such) and you deal with them on your own time. That's the blessing.

Now For The Curse

Too many users assume that the minute someone receives an e-mail the person will read it. Bad assumption.

If you schedule a committee meeting telcon for an hour from now and send an e-mail to each attendee, the chance that all the attendee's will read that message within the hour could be pretty small. On the other hand, if you schedule the meeting for the next day, the chance that they will read the message will be pretty high. Remember, e-mail is not designed for immediacy (that's why you have a telephone), it's designed for convenience.

Some (not all) e-mail systems have features that try to combat this problem. These features (usually called "notification") will notify you when a person has received your e-mail and may also notify you when the person has read it. Referring back to the example in the last paragraph, you could check to see who has checked their e-mail before the meeting and then telephone those who have not read it. We understand the need for notification but believe it should not be used indiscriminately. Please don't use it for all your e-mail since it's a form of SPAM, only for those that are meaningful.

In Closing...

These are just some big picture, common sense good practices that we should be observing in our daily activities (when using electronic mail communications). These should also be common practice of a professional community such as our Society. MORS, as a professional organization, must perform with the highest standards of decorum and acceptable social behavior. We are role models to a terrific analytic community and it would be a shame to taint our good reputation by using improper or unprofessional communication practices.

