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ON MORE EFFECTIVE E-MAIL WRITING

Summary

This article is intended to be a simplified guide for the efficient use of e-mail in business and private communication in English. E-mailing is frequently used as a substitute for other kinds of communication in today's working environment, due in particular, to the fact that messages are transmitted instantly, irrespective of the distance of the recipient. Due to the speed and volume of e-mail, mastering the art of effective e-mail writing includes the knowledge of Network Etiquette or 'Netiquette' and it is therefore important that whether it be for business or private use, the basics of e-mail etiquette are followed.

When writing an e-mail it is important to consider the recipient. Careful consideration will determine the content and style of the e-mail.

No less important is knowing the points of detail in writing e-mail. That is, to be clear and concise in the specific information that the e-mail should contain. Furthermore, abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons are frequently found in e-mail and their use should also be considered. An e-mail is a valuable communication tool and it is essential to use it effectively in order to improve both professional and private communication.

Key words

e-mail, e-mail etiquette, guidelines, effective writing, recipient

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, e-mail (also known as electronic mail) has been widely accepted by the business community as the first broad electronic communication medium.

E-mail is the telecommunication exchange of computer text messages. It may, in addition to plain text message also include attachments of texts and non-text files (graphic images and sound files), programs and spreadsheets.

Some of the benefits of e-mail are that not only it is cheaper and faster than a letter but less intrusive than a phone call. It can be sent to individuals and to a list of people as well. A message can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection, replied to automatically and stored for future review.

Because of these benefits, e-mail use is exploding. However, despite its many advantages, e-mail poses some challenges for its users. In a busy business life, e-mailing is used as a substitute for other kinds of communication with the result that many people find it very difficult to adjust their communication styles to this new medium.

This article is intended to be a short practical reference for more appropriate and effective e-mail writing. In order to write an effective e-mail the recipient must be considered. The list of questions and answers below serves as a guideline towards the appropriate content and style of an e-mail.

The most important points of detail that should be taken into consideration are listed immediately after.

Naturally, the role of language is important since the clarity of an e-mail is essential.

Lists of abbreviations, acronyms and useful expressions and phrases will help develop confidence in writing e-mail in both professional and private communication.

2. Some basic guidelines

The most important thing to remember when writing an e-mail is to consider the reader. The content and style of an e-mail will be affected by the following considerations:

» *What is the objective of the e-mail?*

Do you know what are you trying to achieve? If you do not know what the objective is, think carefully before sending your e-mail.

» *What is the background to the issue?*

It must be clear why you are sending an e-mail if you want to be fully understood.

» *Who is going to be reading it?*

Is it going to be read by the intended recipients or by another person? Remember to bear in mind that e-mail in-boxes are not necessarily only opened by the person named in the 'Send to ' box.

» *What style are you using?*

The style of an e-mail gives a certain impression of you to someone who is opening it for the first time.

» *How to choose the content?*

What does a recipient need to know? How much background information is needed? Do you need any information from the recipient? How much does the recipient understand about the subject matter of the e-mail? If the e-mail covers complex matters, it is good practice to explain that a document follows.

» *Is a conclusion/response/recommendation required?*

Repeating the purpose of the message or giving a direct instruction at the end of an e-mail helps the reader to clearly understand the message.

» *How to deal with attachments?*

If the attachments are sent, they are to be specified clearly. In case they need certain software to be opened it is helpful to say what is needed. Make sure the attachments you send are free of any viruses.

The immediacy of e-mail is very tempting, which is why you should put yourself across appropriately in an e-mail. This form of communication has no tone of voice, facial expressions, body language or gestures to help argument the message.

In this rapid form of communication the detail is very important.

3. Points of detail

When writing an e-mail consider the following list of some of the most important points of detail:

» *Format*

An appropriate format that matches the style used in the company's letters and faxes should be used. A good deal of care in the presentation of your text should be taken, due to the fact that the message you send might not look the same when displayed on your correspondent 's screen. The recipient may be using a different software program to read it. If you don't know which e-mail reader your correspondent has, don't use formatted text or send web pages as text. Do be aware of special characters and cautious with attachments.

» *Typography/font*

People usually find it harder to read things on a screen than on paper. The nrecipient's e-mail reader may not have the same capabilities as your e-mail software. Most companies have a prescribed font and style, but others can be chosen from the drop-down list box. The option to highlight text in your e-mail can also be selected, using devices such as bold, underline and italics. Graphic emphasis can help keep people reading, but it should not be overdone. Never write in capital letters. It gives the impression you are shouting at the recipient.

» *Subject*

Use a 'subject line' that summarises clearly the content of the message. It does not need to be a complete sentence, but make it simple and straightforward. In a business e-mail repeat the subject line in the body of the e-mail, beneath the salutation. It makes no sense to send a message with 'no subject' since it seems to be about nothing. You want your recipient to read your message when it arrives and find it easily in their files at a later date, if they need it.

» *Salutation*

Salutations may be tricky especially if you are crossing cultures and languages. The appropriate form to use will depend on style. A more formal style is used if you have not exchanged correspondence before. Frequently titles are different for men and women. The family name comes first in some cultures and last in others. Honorific can also vary based on status or age.

» *Valediction*

It is considered appropriate to end with an informal sign off. 'Yours sincerely ', Kind regards' and 'Best wishes' are used by most people. Always close with your name, even though it is included at the top of the e-mail.

» *Details of the writer – title, company.*

It can be set up as a 'default' signature, which appears at the foot of the message. This includes your typed name and title as well as details of the company you represent. A good rule of thumb is to keep it short, no longer than four lines.

» *Attachments should be clearly described and mentioned in the text.*

If you are sending pictures or documents make sure that they are a reasonable file size (less than 5MB). Big files can cause problems for the person receiving them. Never send an attachment to someone you do not know the first time you contact them. Never send business attachments outside of business hours and be sure to have anti-virus software installed on your computer.

» *Hyperlinks*

Inserting hyperlinks into e-mail messages is more useful than sending information about something you do not have a copy of, but which is available on a web page. The recipient simply clicks on the link and this action opens the web page.

» *Punctuation*

Don't ignore punctuation, capital letters and spelling. A careless, disorganized e-mail can leave the reader puzzled by the meaning and present you as a careless, disorganized person.

» *Length of e-mail*

There are no hard and fast rules about the appropriate length of an e-mail.A good general rule is to keep the e-mail as short as possible and come directly to the point. Ideally, it should have one point to make and shouldbe clear in what it is asking the recipient to do with the information. Use only a few paragraphs and a few sentences per paragraph and if possible, no more than twelve lines. Bear in mind that some people receive and read hundreds of e-mail communications every day.

» *Line length*

Use short simple sentences. Long sentences and complex syntax are difficult to read and understand. Lines should be under seventy characters long.

» *Paragraphing should be used when there is a change of topic or subject.*

» *Consistency is important if the e-mail contains numbering.*

If you have a number of points to make, stick to a),b),c) or 1.i,1.ii, 1.iii or whichever style you prefer.

4. The role of language

The clarity of an e-mail is essential. Messages must look good. Some people may be literally insulted by getting e-mail with errors, so spellcheck your e-mail. Grammar-checkers and spellcheckers can help. However, remember there are many easily confused words and the computer spellchecker will only identify misspelled words, but not misused ones.

The present simple is used to explain the purpose of the e-mail, whereas the present continuous has a less formal tone and is appropriate to promote a friendly business relationship. The present perfect continuous is frequently used to outline problems or to introduce a topic.

It is important to use polite language, even in informal e-mail. 'Please' can be used in every type of request, and phrases with 'could' and 'would like' are more polite than phrases with 'can' and 'want'. In enquires it is best to avoid imperatives like send

me…

By adding please the sentence becomes more polite.

When things aren't developing according to plan, the use of diplomatic language gives you the opportunity to point out mistakes gently, without offending the person you're writing to.

'We have a slight/minor/little problem.'

'Unfortunately, the mistake is rather serious.'

It is good practice to stick to professional language and you may consider using 'anticipate' instead of 'expect' or 'requirements' instead of 'needs', for example. Also you should always leave out all 'ist' comments –racist, sexist or ageist.

Keeping all of these suggestions in mind, may help in composing e-mail more successfully.

The register of an e-mail (how formal or informal it is) depends on the type of message and who is it written for. An enquiry, apology or an e-mail to a new customer is more formal than an e-mail about rescheduling a meeting.

The following is a list of standard phrases used in e-mailing. Emerson[1] (2004)

5. Abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons

Abbreviations are more common in informal e-mail. That said, some standard abbreviations like ASAP are found in formal communications as well as e-mail.

The following is a list of common abbreviations .Chapman[2] (2007)

appt ....appointment
ASAP ....as soon as possible
at the mo ....at the moment
e.g. ....for example
etc ....and so on
i.e......................in other words
info ....information
pls ....please
re ....regarding/about
rep....................representative
rgds..................regards

1   Emmerson, P., Email English, Macmillan, 2004

2   Chapman, R., English for Emails, Oxford University Press, 2007

w/e .... weekend
wk .... week
yr .... year/your

Acronyms (where initial letters are used to make up another word) are becoming more and more popular in e-mail. There are many already and new ones are appearing daily.

The following is a list of some of the more common acronyms that frequently appear in e-mail. Chapman (2007)

AFAIK .... As far as I know
BCNU .... Be seeing you
BTW .... By the way
CUL8R .... See you later
FYI .... For your information
Fwd .... Forward
IMO .... In my opinion
NRN .... No response needed
Thx .... Thanks
TIA .... Thanks in advance

It would be a good idea to learn these and the ones that are commonly used within your profession or industry sector. However, be careful when using them in email being sent externally because business e-mail etiquette strongly suggests avoiding over familiar language, slang and acronyms.

When communicating with others face to face, 93% of the message is non-verbal. The reader of the e-mail cannot see your face, your gestures or hear the tone of your voice. For that reason chose your words carefully. There are also several textual stand-ins for gestures. A facial gesture can be represented with an 'emoticon' or 'smiley' : a textual drawing of a facial expression. The most common are : -) (happy) and : - ((sad).

Emoticons should be avoided in business e-mail unless they are informal messages between co-workers.

6. Conclusion

This article is intended for students and business professionals whose first language is not English but who have to communicate in English in the course of their study and work.

The business world has changed a great deal sin-ce the introduction of the Internet. Traditional formal business letters have been changed by business e-mail which has imposed some new challenges and opportunities in business communication.

Lydia Ramsey[3] (2007) says that an e-mail is as much a part of our professional image as the clothes we wear, the postal letters we write, the greeting on our voice mail and the handshake we offer.

A systematic approach can speed up and improve the process of effective e-mail writing. This article gives an insight into some basic knowledge of e-mail etiquette. Common phrases for typical e-mails, along with lists of abbreviations and acronyms serve as a short practical reference for more appropriate and effective e-mail writing. Business writing represents an opportunity for the businessperson. In order to establish positive business relationships, the businessperson has to be perceived as a caring and intelligent human being with whom it would be a joy to communicate. A clear, concise and precise e-mail will definitely contribute to that.

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3   Ramsey, L., Business Email Etiquette: Maintaining a Professional Image, 2007

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O USPJEŠNOM PISANJU E-MAILA

Sažetak

Ovaj rad je zamišljen kao jednostavan vodič za uspješno pisanje e-maila u poslovnoj i privatnoj komunikaciji na engleskom jeziku. U radnom okruženju e-mail često zamjenjuje druge vrste komunikacije, ponajviše jer omogućava brzi prijenos poruka neovisno o udaljenosti sugovornika.

Vještina uspješnog pisanja e-maila uključuje i kulturu komuniciranja putem interneta. Važno je, bez obzira na to radi li se o poslovnoj ili privatnoj komunikaciji, slijediti bonton emaila. Pišući e-mail, moramo znati komu ga upućujemo. Pažljivo promišljanje odredit će mu sadržaj i stil. Veoma je važno znati i neka opća pravila o pisanju e-maila koja uključuju jasnoću i preciznost njegovoga sadržaja.

Skraćenice, akronimi i ikone raspoloženja također se koriste pri pisanju e-maila i stoga ih je poželjno poznavati. E-mail je zasigurno vrijedan komunikacijski alat, stoga je bitno znati pravilno ga koristiti i tako olakšati i unaprijediti poslovnu i privatnu komunikaciju.

Ključne riječi

e-mail, bonton e-maila, vodič, uspješno pisanje, primatelj e-maila

Tablica 1: Standard phrases for e-mail

Formal /Neutral	Informal
Name	
Dear Mr/Mrs /Ms Dupius Dear Mary	Hi / Hello Mary Mary, ... (or no name at all)
Previous contact	
Thank you for your e-mail of ..... Further to your last e-mail, ... I apologise for not getting in contact with you before now.	Thanks for your e-mail, Re your e-mail, ... Sorry I haven't written for ages, but I've been really busy.
Reason for writing	
I am writing in connection with .... In reply to your e-mail, here are ..... We would like to point out that	Just a short note about .... Here's the .... You wanted. Please note that
Giving information	
I am writing to let you know that .... We are able to confirm that .... We regret to inform you that	Just a note to say .... We can confirm that ..... Unfortunately, ...
Attachments	
Please find attached my report. I'm sending you .... as a pdf file.	I've attached .... Here is the .... you wanted
Asking for information	
Could you give me some information about I would like to know .... I'm interested in receiving/finding out ...	Can you tell me a little more about .... I'd like to know .... Please send me ...
Requests	
I'd be grateful if you could .... Do you think I could have .... ?	Please could you ... Can I have ...?
Promising action	
I will .... I will contact you again shortly.	I'll ... I'll get back to you soon.
Offering help	
Would you like me to .... ? If you wish, I would be happy to ...	Do you want me to .... ? Shall I ... ?
Final comments	
Thank you for your help.r Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. My direct line is	Thanks again for .... Just give me a call if you have any questions. My number is ...
Close	
I am looking forward to ...(+ ing) Give my regards to ... Best wishes Regards	Looking forward to ...(+ ing) Best wishes to ... Speak to/ See you soon. Bye (for now) All the best