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Save time, create efficiencies by effectively communicating by e-mail

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During the current economic downturn, there is an increased emphasis in many organizations to do more with less, including employees and other resources. At the same time, there is an even greater focus on productivity. This combination of factors can readily translate into increased personal and organizational stress, especially when these expectations are not accompanied by a corresponding decrease in other activities, such as e-mail use.

Although this readily accessible method of communicating can produce positive results if used effectively, e-mails can also erode valuable time. A key difference in the degree of success achieved will be based on whether those involved in the communications process are deliberate and purposeful in the way that they approach e-mail interactions.

A beginning point in applying this more disciplined approach is to ask ourselves questions, such as the following: Is there a need to communicate? What is the outcome that I want to achieve for myself and others? Who needs to be included in the communication? What method(s) of communicating will best meet the desired objectives? Benefits will be derived by asking questions of this nature throughout the communications process.

The following are tips for using time effectively in e-mail communications:

1. Pay attention to any tendencies to go on automatic pilot and use this speedy and readily available means of communication to send unnecessary messages. The result can be overloaded inboxes, disorganization and loss of productivity.

2. Select e-mails only when this method of communicating will enable you to achieve desired objectives. Before sending, ensure that your e-mail is appropriate for the specific situation and facilitates communication.

3. Based on the situation, recognize that e-mails can serve as the sole means of communication or used in conjunction with other alternatives, such as telephone calls,

meetings and other written correspondence. For example, an initial meeting or phone call may be necessary to gain mutual understanding prior to pursuing e-mail options.

4. Consider e-mails as an efficient way to convey basic information, send relevant attachments, schedule and make preparations for meetings, provide overviews of meetings or other discussions, and distribute the same information to multiple recipients.

5. Select alternative means of communicating when information is sensitive or confidential. If content of this nature is disclosed, it may subject the writer and organization to numerous hours of explanation and be used as potential evidence in the event of litigation.

6. Recognize that there are downsides to e-mail communications if information is complex or lengthy. The same applies when an interaction requires creativity, brainstorming or negotiation. Examine each situation on a case-by-case basis to determine whether e-mails can be used with other types of communications to improve the overall process.

7. Take time for face-to-face discussions or telephone conversations when participating in communications that involve emotions (e.g. humor, conflict). Be cautious in using e-mails in these situations, since the ability to hear another's voice tone or observe body language is missing. This caution is reinforced by a research study described by Mark Vickers in American Management Association's May 2006 e-newsletter article, "The Miscommunication Medium," which states, "the recipients of e-mail can and frequently do misinterpret the tone and emotional content of those messages despite the fact that the senders are quite confident that they'll be understood."

8. Decide if each recipient has "a need to know" before inserting names in the To, Cc, or Bcc fields. Recipients should be able to readily understand the reason for their inclusion.

9. Avoid responding Reply to All when an e-mail is sent to a number of recipients, unless all need your feedback. For example, before replying to a meeting invitation, question who on the list will benefit from receiving this information.

10. Mark e-mails as "High Importance" only if they require immediate review and response. Recipients may overlook your e-mails if you use this identification routinely and your messages do not meet these criteria.

11. Avoid the need to resend an e-mail because information was overlooked initially. Check your e-mails before hitting the Send button to ensure that the intended content and attachments were included.

12. Before responding or forwarding, retain any prior messages included in the body of the e-mail that the recipient may need to reference and delete those that are no longer relevant or appropriate. Steps, such as these, take the reader's time and other needs into consideration and also reduce the potential for misunderstanding.

13. Consider the recipient's ability to open and read attachments. Use software that normally allows recipients to open your e-mails in a compatible mode.

14. Review each e-mail from the recipient's perspective. Make revisions, as necessary, to foster clarity and enhance understanding.

15. Change direction if your e-mails are not working for you or others involved. There are times when it becomes obvious that e-mails are not addressing a situation effectively and that each e-mail sent is creating the need for another. When this point is reached, pause and decide whether to initiate a conversation or meeting.

16. Recognize that there are costs associated with the time spent in preparing and responding to e-mails. By providing information or training, the organization can increase effective e-mail use.

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