Guard against unintended consequences when composing e-mails

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E-mails are an integral part of our ability to conduct business on a day-to-day basis. Although this electronic technology facilitates workplace communications and provides numerous benefits for both individuals and organizations, there are also limitations and downsides associated with its use.

Based on a 2010 survey by the Radicati Group Inc., business users sent an average of 33 e-mails daily and received approximately 72 messages. These numbers point to the potential for e-mail-related activities to consume a considerable portion of time out of each workday. This combination of volume and time demands can readily translate into hastily composed e-mails and unanticipated consequences.

Composing e-mails without sufficient attention to details increases the potential that their content and intent will be misinterpreted. In these situations, senders and receivers are exchanging written words and do not have the benefit of additional communication cues, such as voice tone and body language.

Conflicts can occur when misinterpreted e-mails continue to be sent back and forth without clarification. At times, these exchanges can result in the expression of extreme emotions or opinions, known as flaming. Messages of this nature have the potential to further escalate tensions, since they often contain insulting, abusive, or hostile comments.

Even if e-mail misunderstandings do not trigger emotional disagreements of this magnitude, they can become barriers to constructive communications. Workplace relationships and productivity can be negatively impacted. In all cases, these written disputes produce a paper trail of documentation which may be used as evidence in the event of charges or litigation.

The following provide a number of tips for guarding against potential conflicts and other unintended consequences when composing e-mails:

1. Select e-mails when this choice facilitates communications and enables you to achieve desired objectives. Avoid tendencies to overlook other options and rely on this speedy and readily available means of communicating.

2. Recognize that e-mails are more appropriate for some purposes than for others.

E-mails can be effective if used to convey basic information, schedule appointments, or distribute the same information to multiple recipients. However, other options should be taken into consideration if creativity and brainstorming are needed or if the information being shared is controversial, complex, sensitive, or confidential.

3. Remember that e-mails are a source of workplace interruptions that can translate to a loss of productivity and accompanying frustrations. Take these factors into account in deciding whether it is necessary to send e-mails and, if so, whether others need to be copied.

4. Be alert to times when e-mails are not facilitating mutual understanding. When these communications are not addressing situations effectively, pause, change your course of action and have discussions with those involved.

5. Avoid using grammar or formatting that has the potential to establish a negative tone. The use of all capital letters can give the appearance that you are shouting. Multiple punctuation marks, bold text and underlined words can be perceived as demanding or condescending, based on the overall context of your message.

6. Recognize that humor may not come across as intended. Since voice tone and body language are missing and you are relying only on words, your message can easily be misunderstood. As a result, it may unintentionally offend the recipient.

7. Avoid sending an immediate reply if you become upset, angry, or experience other similar emotions after reading an e-mail. "Go to the balcony" or take time to reflect before responding. Instead of making negative assumptions about the sender's intent, reread the e-mail to ensure that you did not misunderstand its contents. Consider initiating a meeting or telephone conversation, since both options provide opportunities to address and resolve potential differences of opinion.

8. Review each e-mail that you are writing from the recipient's perspective. Make revisions, as needed, to foster clarity and enhance understanding.

9. Postpone writing e-mails if you are distracted, overly tired, or otherwise unable to focus on the situation at hand. Consider writing a draft on these occasions and reviewing it at a later time.

10. Question your use of smiley faces and similar symbols to express emotions. Since these emoticons, as they are commonly referenced, are often inserted in e-mails to clarify the sender's intent, it may be preferable to eliminate them and revise your wording to prevent misinterpretation.

11. Develop a habit of rereading your e-mails in their entirety before hitting the "send" button. A practice of making revisions prior to sending will eliminate mistakes and ensure that your message is written as you intended.

12. Recognize that the content of e-mails reflects on the professional images of individuals and overall organizations. Information and training will increase your effectiveness in using this method of communication in conducting your day-to-day business interactions.

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