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Tips for increasing the benefits of e-mail and guarding against the pitfalls

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When we hit the "send" button, our e-mails reflect both on us as professionals and on the organizations that we represent. With more than 183 billion e-mail messages exchanged daily, writing and responding to e-mails occupies numerous hours out of the workdays of employees at all levels of an organization.

While e-mails have significantly changed the way that many of us conduct business, little attention has been paid to how effectively we use this everyday means of communication.

For a technology that has apparent benefits associated with its use, it also has numerous downsides for organizations and employees, including messages that are overly casual for a business setting, over-reliance on this means of communication, miscommunication, loss of productivity, damaged relationships, and a host of other potential human resource and legal issues.

Two ways to more effectively reduce the potential downsides and increase the benefits of this technology include adopting appropriate policies and educating employees on e-mail etiquette. Policies provide a means for employers to establish and communicate expectations and requirements for employees regarding e-mail use, whereas e-mail etiquette better enables employees to communicate with knowledge, understanding and respect.

According to the 2006 E-Mail, Instant Messaging & Blog Survey from the **American Management Association** and The ePolicy Institute, employers have been motivated to institute electronic technology policies based on concerns over litigation and the role that electronic evidence plays in lawsuits.

Survey results indicated that 76% of organizations have established policies governing e-mail use and content, 24% have had employee e-mails subpoenaed, and 15% have gone to court to battle lawsuits triggered by employees' e-mails.

The following are 10 tips to assist employees in their use of e-mail in the workplace:

1. Keep the recipient's needs in mind when drafting e-mails. Recognize that the potential for miscommunication is inherent in e-mail use due to the inability to observe body language and hear another's tone of voice. Your effectiveness in compensating for these missing communication signals will increase if you focus not only on what you write, but also on the way that it may be perceived.

2. Avoid any tendency to rely on this one speedy mode of communication and neglect others. Remind yourself that e-mail is only one means of communicating and that other alternatives or a combination may be a more appropriate for the situation at hand. Whereas e-mail offers users the benefit of communicating basic information and readily reaching multiple recipients simultaneously, meetings and/or telephone calls may be preferred or necessary when the information involved is complex, lengthy, sensitive or confidential.

3. Recognize that the subject line is a key component of your overall message and that a recipient may overlook your e-mail if the line is blank. Any wording that you select should facilitate your ability to identify, file and retrieve the e-mail and create a reason for it to be read by the recipient.

4. Proof your e-mail before sending to ensure that the punctuation and grammar meet acceptable standards for business communications. Since e-mails are less formal than letters or memos, avoid habits that allow you to become overly informal or even lax.

5. Ensure that your e-mails comply with organizational policies (e.g. harassment). As property of the organization, e-mails are subject to being retrieved. Therefore, adopt the perspective that your e-mails have the potential to become electronic "DNA" evidence.

6. When initiating or responding to e-mails, limit the list of recipients to persons who are directly involved with the subject and/or have a "need to know." Avoid automatically clicking "reply all" when you respond to e-mails that have names listed on the Cc line.

7. Before hitting the send button, reread your e-mail in its entirety to ensure that it conveys your intended message.

Also check other details from top to bottom, such as whether it includes addresses of intended recipients, information in the subject line, and all appropriate attachments.

8. Remember that once your e-mail is sent, it can be forwarded again and again without your knowledge. Whereas you control what you write, you normally will lose this control once you hit the send button.

9. Picture each e-mail as a mirror that reflects on your professional image and that of your organization. If you are emotional or angry, take the necessary time to achieve physical or mental distance from the situation before composing an e-mail.

Consider whether a meeting or telephone call will better address your concerns. If you decide to respond with an e-mail, review it carefully to ensure that it accomplishes your overall objectives.

10. Review the contents of each e-mail and ask yourself, "How will I feel tomorrow and what will the repercussions be if my e-mail appears in newspaper headlines, is discussed on a morning talk show, or becomes evidence in a lawsuit?" Remember that one hastily drafted e-mail can damage your career and/or the reputation of your organization.

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