



Management Bulletin

North Carolina State Laboratory of Public Health | Laboratory Improvement Unit

Writing and Managing Electronic Business Communications

As we live in a world of instant communication, do you ever wonder how something that was designed to make our lives easier has ended up consuming so much of our time and energy? This is, of course, referring to electronic mail and memos! Many employees in various industries are finding that half of their time is spent reading email! Devoting so much time to this task may not be an option for busy healthcare workers, but most employees agree it has become an increasingly demanding responsibility. Along with the sheer volume of email, the number of common email and memo errors causes misunderstandings and hinders work productivity. This bulletin will offer tips for employees to improve their written communication skills so that emails and memos can be composed clearly and concisely, achieving desired results and increasing effectiveness.

Memos versus e-mails

A memo, short for memorandum, is a simple way to communicate important information within an organization. Memos are often distributed electronically as an efficient means of sending the information to a large group of people. A business memo is somewhat formal, but less formal than a business letter. Usually there is a clear call to action from management or team leaders, so people need to understand what to do. The information should be brief and to the point, with instructions or directives given clearly and concisely.

An email is often written less formally than a letter or memo. The message can be sent to an individual or to a group of people, and is not limited to employees within the organization.

Creating the message

Both memos and emails require a few basic considerations:

- **Understand your audience.** If you know who you are writing for, you can make good decisions about how much background

information to include and the appropriate tone and language to use. Whether we're conscious of it or not, we constantly modify what we say and how we say it based on who our audience is. The way we express ourselves to our boss and co-workers is probably different from how we communicate with our teenagers!

- **Define your purpose.** Know what you want to say, and the action or reaction you want to solicit from your reader(s). The opening statement should include your main idea or purpose with other details given in the body of the message. Make sure you have sufficient knowledge of the background and history of the topic, and stick to that one topic. Attempting to cover multiple topics confuses the clarity of the message and increases the risk of your audience missing important pieces of information.
- **Set the tone with the three p's: polite, positive, and professional!** Whether a congratulatory note or a management directive, messages should be polite and cordial with positive aspects emphasized and professionalism maintained, regardless of how tense or controversial the topic might be. You will not go wrong with an appropriately added "please" or "thank you."
- **Proofread your message.** It is hard to be taken seriously when your message is full of grammar and punctuation errors. Take time to review your message before sending. You may even ask a co-worker to review since many errors are caught with a second set of eyes.

Email etiquette

Wouldn't it be nice if everyone who received an email account had to agree to follow a certain set of rules to use it? For those who use email in the work environment, there is certainly a desirable standard of conduct that should apply. Business emails and memos should be given the same amount of care and attention as if they were being composed on business letterhead. Here are some things to remember regarding professional email conduct:

- Use a signature that includes contact information. Your employer may have a signature template that defines the required information. Most signatures include a mailing address, website, and phone numbers.
- Use carbon (or courtesy) copy (CC) and blind carbon copy (BCC) appropriately. Only people who are directly involved need to receive a CC. When sending to a large distribution list, BCC can be used so that individual recipients won't have to see a huge list of names. Don't use BCC to keep others from seeing who you copied; it may be viewed as a way of talking behind someone's back and shows a lack of confidence in what you are communicating.
- Group email should be sent only when it's useful to every recipient. When replying to group email, refrain from using "reply all" unless the group is compiling collective input and only if you really have something to add. Otherwise, it is best to reply to the sender only. It is a waste of time for other recipients to open twenty emails that say, "Me too!"
- Never send large attachments without notice, and make sure the recipient's software is compatible to receive them. Multiple large attachments should be sent over several emails to avoid long download time or if available, you may use a program to "zip" or compress them before sending.
- Make sure your subject line accurately reflects the content of your email. If your subject is "Hi" and your recipient is having a busy day, then you can be assured your message will not receive priority for being read!
- Consider the implied tone of your message in relation to how it is constructed. Using all capital letters indicates shouting, and multiple exclamation points or question marks may be perceived as rude or condescending. GET IT!!!!??? Using proper sentence structure, grammar and punctuation is a must for business emails to be taken seriously. Save the abbreviations and random phrases for personal emails.
- Colors and fancy fonts can be hard to read and should be avoided. Check to see if your company has a standard format for the appearance of emails.
- Never use an old email to hit "reply" and start typing about an entirely new topic. This is a great way to confuse your reader!
- Don't mass email jokes and stories. This falls under personal email, and many companies have policies about using business email accounts for personal use. Even if your company allows it, your co-workers may not find the item funny or interesting – especially when the report they are working on was due yesterday!
- Don't use e-mail as an excuse to avoid personal contact. When co-workers are just down the hall, a brief visit in person can go a long way to adding a personal touch and improving employee relations. Don't forget that telephones can still be useful, too, especially when email messages cannot be short and to the point.
- When receiving email, if you cannot address a question or concern in a timely manner, then at least let the sender know you received the message and will be responding later.
- Most importantly, remember that email isn't private! Business email can be forwarded, retrieved, examined and even used in a court of law. Never put in an email message anything that you wouldn't put on a postcard. If your content is well written and professional, then that simple click of the "send" button to the wrong recipient will allow you to avoid embarrassment.

Even when all of these tips are followed, email may still be consuming a large amount of your time and energy. Technical consultant and blogger, Brent McConnell, makes the following observation in his article titled "The Mythical 40 Hour Work Week." *Today we define success by whether or not we've processed all our incoming email and at least looked like we handled all the day's "hot" issues. How many times have you gotten nothing productive done during the day, but felt successful just because your INBOX was empty? We've become a slave to our communications systems and reacting to them rather than intelligently planning and using email and IM as tools for thoughtful articulation of messages.* Don't let a quest for an empty inbox dictate your daily schedule. Instead, keep your real goals in mind, and set aside certain times of the day to read and respond to messages.

By using these tips to create and manage messages in a professional and courteous way, your business communications will be ones that are taken seriously and achieve results. You cannot control the content of everyone else's messages, but you can make your own a pleasure to read instead of a chore!

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