

Technology Corner

By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

How to More Effectively Use and Manage E-Mail

It wasn't so long ago that e-mail for most of us was a rather novel thing, something we played with more than relied upon as the core of our daily communication. My, how things have changed in recent years! Now the vast majority of us not only use e-mail routinely in our daily lives, but we depend upon it heavily for our daily business communications. In fact, we are so reliant on it now that many of us typically have two e-mail addresses, one for home and all our personal mail, and one for all our office and business mail. Moreover, we are no longer reliant upon access to a PC and a power plug in order for us to be able to deal with our e-mail now that wireless and portable devices, such as Blackberrys, are readily available.

Along with this rapid acceptance and pervasive use of e-mail have come the inevitable problems that must be dealt with if we are going to survive and make effective and efficient use of this new technology. This is due in part to the fact that e-mail now provides such an inexpensive, easy-to-use and almost instantaneous way to communicate with people all around the world. At the same time, it also presents a host of new organizational, management, technical, social and legal issues that must be addressed.

E-mail has, over time, become the primary form of communication in the business community. Written communications, in the form of a traditional letter or memo, are almost secondary. This transition carries a price, since the language of e-mail correspondence tends to be much less precise and accurate than in a traditional letter on the same subject. When you add to that the speed and simplicity of e-mail, it encourages a whole new informality in communications. With e-mail, you can dash off a response clear around the world almost instantly, whereas a letter must be composed, edited, printed, placed in an envelope, stamped



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with correct postage and mailed. The inefficiencies in this latter method can easily be seen. On the other hand, although the use of e-mail is efficient, it brings with it a whole new vocabulary as well as a host of largely unwritten “netiquette” rules for proper e-mail conduct, both of which increase the time involved in the e-mail learning curve and the consequences associated with failure to comply with the rules.

Common Features of E-Mail Programs

As our e-mail use grows rapidly, let us review some good e-mail management strategies with which you should become familiar and use where appropriate—not only to make your sending experience as pleasant as possible, but also to make your messages those that recipients want to receive, read and respond to:

- First, make sure you have a good, relevant subject line that is short and deals with the topic of the message.
- Second, try to keep the message text as short and sweet as possible.
- Third, always add your signature block at the end of the text of the message (not as an attachment) so those reading your message will know who you are.
- Fourth, check the formatting of the message for such things as the font and whether the text is going to be in plain text versus HTML format, since some e-mail systems do not handle HTML formatting very well.
- Fifth, when selecting the recipients, decide whether you want to just copy (cc) or blind copy (bcc) some of them, as bcc recipients are not seen by others.
- Sixth, when formatting a reply, decide if you want to reply only to the sender or to all the recipients.
- Seventh, often a handy way to send a message to a particular person is to forward it to him.
- Eighth, while the use of attachments is acceptable, it is often overused, usually out of laziness; so be careful of how many attachments you send and their size—especially if they are PDF files, which have a tendency to be rather large. In addition, many recipients will not accept attachments due to virus issues.
- Ninth, if your e-mail system has spell check, use it before you send your message.

- Tenth, if your message truly has a priority, append to it the appropriate signal before you send the message.

Cost of E-Mail

What is the true cost of e-mail and how do you compute that? These are good questions since composing and sending e-mail is often seen as a relatively cost-free enterprise, particularly by the rank and file employees of a business. The cost of e-mail resides in the time involved in composing it, reading it and filing it. An example of an inefficient use of time with e-mail is sending a single message to many people in the same organization instead of sending it just to the person to whom it directly applies. While the time spent in the one-on-one case might be relatively minimal, that time is multiplied exponentially when additional readers are added to the equation, and is expanded even more as some or all of those recipients respond to the message. Lately, this problem has been compounded even further by the significant increase in the amount of useless junk and spam that invades most of our mail boxes on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this junk mail has to be dealt with in other than a summary fashion, lest something important slip through. An average person probably spends 30 minutes per day or longer just dealing with junk e-mail.

Using E-Mail Efficiently

How does one use e-mail efficiently? There are a whole host of suggestions that can be made, but I will only deal with a few, many of which involve sensible workplace practices. One is that not every e-mail you receive needs an immediate reply—in fact, very few do. Another is that you should avoid constantly checking your inbox for new mail, even if your e-mail system tells you that you have new mail. Unless you are expecting something from someone, you should, as a matter of general practice, be able to get by with checking your mail only three or four times during a typical work day—once in the morning, once at noon, once mid-afternoon and once before leaving work for home (try it; you’ll like it). If you can do it, set a fixed time each day when you will reply to all your e-mails—I recommend mid-afternoon. Still another is to organize all your incoming messages in terms of their importance and priority. This is particularly easy to do if your e-mail program comes with a “Label” feature by which messages with

certain priorities can be color coded, making them easier to spot—Eudora can do this. Another is not to be afraid to use an “ignore e-mail from” feature or filters that come with your e-mail program, especially in a workgroups environment.

Efficiently Managing E-Mail

How should one go about managing one’s e-mail efficiently to avoid confusion and disorganization? One suggestion is to create a folder for each project or client, and then create subfolders underneath those if needed. Another is to decide if you want all your incoming e-mail to go into your inbox initially for hand sorting versus directly into individual folders through the use of filters. Using the inbox can work rather well if your e-mail program has the ability to sort messages by their subject line so they can be reviewed quickly and filed in folders. An alternative is to rely on the search tool that comes with your e-mail program; but this is sort of a “last ditch” solution for finding a specific message. While you can usually create many folders in advance, there will always be the need to create additional folders in a hurry. If you are in a working group environment, have everyone in the group adopt the same e-mail filing folder system so anyone can easily find a message on anyone else’s system. If you decide to file your e-mail automatically by use of filters, always be sure to check those filtered bins periodically, as these filter tools are not 100 percent accurate. In addition, senders can often send a message with a strange subject line that will totally fool the filters. Invariably, these messages will be mission-critical and in need of immediate attention.

Finding That Message

When it comes to finding a missing e-mail message, there are several options, some of which are more efficient than others. One way is to visually sort through the applicable e-mail folder once it has been sorted. This typically can be done by who sent it, the date it was sent or the subject line. You then have to visually scan through all the messages in that folder to find the one you are looking for, which is rather inefficient, especially if there are a lot of messages in that folder. Another way is to use the “Find” feature of your e-mail software program and use a key word or words search. Some e-mail programs come with tools that will do more advanced searches with specific criteria that can be applied just to selected mail folders. The parameters

you can set for these searches are quite versatile and, if properly used, usually provide the most efficient and quickest method of searching. It is recommended that you use at least two criteria when doing such a search. One thing that will help speed up all searches is to periodically delete or archive old mail.

Controlling the Volume

One important thing to do at all times is to avoid e-mail overload. One way to do this is to learn to recognize e-mail messages you can safely ignore or delegate to someone else to handle. When you do that, forward it to them with a copy sent to the sender so he or she will know this has been done. Another is to delete all unnecessary e-mail you receive as soon as possible. Another is knowing when you are not expected to respond. Typically, this occurs when you have been copied (cc) or blind copied (bcc) on a message. Another is to know when to deal with e-mail, as it normally does not have to be—nor should it be—dealt with instantly. Only check for mail a few times a day. When you do, scan through messages and use just the subject line to dispose of them if you can. Handle important e-mails first and save the rest for later, maybe even the next day. If you see a particular discussion thread developing, wait, if you can, until the thread is fully developed before reading all about it and then responding if need be. If you are going to be absent for a period of time, set up an auto response (but do it right) that tells each sender you are gone, who to contact while you are gone and when you will be back. Lastly, have a firm e-mail policy in place that deals with all these issues as well as things like joke e-mails, ads, scams and chain letters plus the use of the office system for personal e-mail.

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