

“Insulting or motivating? A few keystrokes can make a difference to that e-mail”



"I couldn't believe the e-mail one senior manager sent to the entire department some time ago," reports Mark, a young manager at a financial services firm. "It was full of double negatives and misspellings, and the entire document was in lower case. We weren't sure whether we should be insulted or alarmed. We were both, I think."

As this real-world example illustrates, the e-mail has its pitfalls. Connecting workers around the globe with just a few keystrokes, e-mail is easy to use and fast to deliver. But e-mail can create trouble for the unwary. However, it takes only seconds to turn an e-mail that could insult or damage into one that inspires and contributes. This article outlines some of the more common e-mail pitfalls, and their remedies, that you may have, like others, experienced.

1. **The Relaxed Format:** Managers, who appear professional, well educated, even erudite in a face-to-face encounter or traditional business letter sometimes send e-mails that astonish their subordinates with errors that can undermine their authority and affect the corporate image. According to studies, senior managers are more likely than middle managers to dash off an un-proofed, unedited e-message.

Bottom line: Check the spelling, grammar and usage in every email, and you'll avoid becoming an unwitting victim of printout pin-ups displaying your shortcomings to highly amused and somewhat cynical subordinates.

2. **Regional and Global Differences:** Though the e-mail is devoid of body language and intonation, it can, and indeed often does, carry an accent. If it conveys an "Ulster/Irish" sense of humour and urgency but is being transmitted to a kinder, slower-paced clime, your e-mail can damage, or at least unsettle, otherwise productive working relationships. Avoid slang, too. Not everyone understands expressions such as "don't lose the bap", "he looks like himself" and "he'll have a smile on the other side of his face"

Bottom line: Especially in e-mails to recipients in other countries and cultures, keep your language neutral, devoid of colloquialisms and be courteous. It's a lot harder to recover from complaints about excessive rudeness than of its opposite.

3. **Misuse of the Company Network:** Many employees are unaware of what is expected of them when using the company network. For example does your company allow liberal or reasonable use, "lunchtime only" access, or is there a "no personal use" policy in place? It's probably spelled out clearly in your Company Handbook or some procedure, but have you or your employees actually read the

relevant sections? Most such policies tell employees not to extend unwelcome invitations to co-workers, send questionable jokes, visit naughty Web sites, or write to their solicitors using your company headed paper.

Bottom line: It's hard enough attracting good workers and developing strategies to retain them. Educate yourself and your employees about proper use of e-mail, and you'll minimise the need for reprimands that could result in a breakdown in communication and team work or, worse still, some one resigning.

4. **Cybersurveillance:** That e-mail you consigned to the re-cycle bin often actually doesn't disappear until the IT or some other Department decides it's time to dispose of what is in it. And because some privacy assumptions do not apply to all employees using a company network, sensitive communications and confidential information inherent in salary and performance discussions, for example, could become available, at some point, to a wider audience than was originally intended.

Bottom line: Before invoking the "send" command, ask yourself: Is this information something I'd write electronically for all to see, or should it be slipped into a sealed envelope and stamped "Confidential"? The latter may be more time consuming but in the longer term save time and more importantly money.

5. **It's Not What You Say:** Your e-mail travels across cyberspace without verbal or non-verbal cues to soften, correct, or clarify your message. So it really is critical to take care in how you say it. What you include and what you fail to include will have impact on both your reader and your corporate image. Some of the clues you need to communicate effectively with your co-workers are in their e-mails to you. For example, "to-the-point" communicators will likely appreciate responses that are similarly short and crisp. "Chatty" conversationalists who focus on the people aspects of their work message will appreciate e-mails that mirror their communication preferences.

Bottom line: Read your co-workers e-mails for clues to their preferred communication style and craft your responses accordingly. Simply adding a friendly greeting at the start or breaking a long, dense paragraph into short bulleted chunks can have a big impact.

So don't let your standards slip. Your business or your own future could suffer from some flippant or unintentional remark that was not proofed.