The 10th dimension... the power of ten

Ed Bonner and Adrianne Morris discuss the etiquette of email communication

In days gone by we used to write letters, and this was generally considered an art form along with poetry and prose. By the same token, in bygone days, people used to prepare food for cooking and used telephones that were plugged into wall sockets. Those days are gone and today we are into instant mobile phones, pre-prepared food and instant communication systems. In respect of the latter, communication doesn’t come much more irritating than an email. The corollary to ‘instant’ is ‘brevity’. With this in mind, let’s look at some things that we should or should not be doing:

1 Where possible, delegate a secretary the task of screening, opening and responding to your emails. This implies that you should have a separate email address for personal emails.

2 Do something with each email you receive – either open, or delete. Don’t just leave it sitting unopened. Nothing is more irritating than seeing the same heading crop up in bold every time we access our inbox. The number of emails in your inbox should always read zero or even one. 

3 The quickest way to deal with an email is to delete it, and this should be the fate of every email that appears non-essential reading. There is an unfortunate tendency in our brave new world for friends to wish to share anything from a funny story to a dramatic picture. Most of us are busy, and cannot afford to spend important time reading spam or even low-grade ham, which can take up 80 per cent of your time to deal with, leaving 20 per cent for what is important. Kill it quickly and without regret. You could send a response saying: “Your forwarded stories are amusing but my inbox is becoming overcrowded, so please don’t send any more”.

4 If it looks important, open, read and respond instantly and succinctly. In all cases, keep your replies brief and to the point – wordiness is not virtuous in the ethereal world of email communication. The subject line should be very succinct, for example, “meeting”, and the main message should be short; for example, “Let’s meet at 12 – best wishes, Ed”. What you do not want to do is to be repetitive.

5 Never write anything that may come back to bite you later, especially when the email you have just received evokes emotional or angry feelings. You should not reply immediately, but think through your response carefully, write it, read it and think again without sending. Rather acknowledge receipt, and say your written response will follow. Your response should not be angry or critical, but conciliatory and when necessary appeasing. Be careful with direct apologies, although you can say something like: “I am sorry you had an uncomfortable experience”. Build bridges, not court cases.

6 Regarding copying and forwarding of a email, there is an unfortunate tendency to overload this, and the technique should be reserved for essential reading only. If you keep getting information you don’t really need, drop a note to the perpetrator expressing gratitude for keeping you in the loop but requesting that only essential information be sent.

7 Should you bother with the use of capital letters? This is a personal choice, and personally I have no issue with no capitals, but if it annoys you to receive a message in lower case only, do as you would be done unto.

8 You should do a spell check? In my book, definitely: I find spelling errors profoundly irritating.

9 Rather than bunching a whole batch of information on different subjects into one email, send multiple shorter messages with succinct titles.

10 Avoid printing copies of every email you receive or send, unless it is essential to do so. Filing paper can soon become a nightmare. Be kind to trees.

If on the one hand emails can be a brilliant way of communicating, on the other it can be distracting and a gross waste of time, so be parsimonious with your replies brief and to the point – wordiness is not virtuous in the ethereal world of email communication. The subject line should be very succinct, for example, “meeting”, and the main message should be short; for example, “Let’s meet at 12 – best wishes, Ed”. What you do not want to do is to be repetitive.

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