

E-mail: Good News and Bad News

The Perils and Opportunities of E-mail

By Jose Campos

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As our professional communities become ever more global, we often work with people who are in far-flung places – and often with people for whom English is a second language and whose culture is very different from ours. This means we need to develop increasingly sophisticated and effective “global communication” skills so that we consistently deliver business results – even when the rest of our team or organization is scattered around the world.

Collaboration using e-mail is one way to conduct global business, but it comes with limitations, which you may have encountered:

- How many times have you been unclear about the action you, personally, were expected to take after reading an e-mail?
- How many times have you read an e-mail with misspellings, missing words or a grammatical error that obscured the sender's meaning?
- How did you know that your message would be interpreted in the proper way by someone whose language and culture are very different than yours?
- How many e-mails did it take to clarify an issue with your peers in other countries for whom English is a second language?

Convenient but incomplete

E-mail is convenient. We can store it, delete it or react to it instantly. Yet it's the immediacy of e-mail that can lead to the problems above if e-mail writers whip out a message and hit “send” without thinking deeply about what they've written – without checking for errors, expectations, outcomes and completeness, let alone proper English and sensitivity to other cultures.

Above all, remember that words themselves constitute only about 10 percent of overall communication; the rest is made up of facial expressions, body language, tone and other physical manifestations. Therefore, e-mail starts out with a handicap: it only contains words. So you are in effect missing 90 percent of the communication. It's critical for everyone in your organization to set about improving their e-mail skills, given that it is a tool with inherent shortcomings. *(See Figure 1 later in this article for additional information on means of communication.)*

Cultural context

Let's add complexity by considering the factors of language, distance and culture as they pertain to e-mail. For example, in many European cultures the need for “context” in communication is very important – your message should have an introduction, a premise, the message itself, a conclusion and a clear call to action if needed. Anything short of this and your communication may lead to misunderstandings. Or take the case in Asia, where the “tone” is important and the need to maintain “face” is critical. Yet many e-mails are sent with terse or overly assertive language.

For many people around the world, English is a second language – the context of words is based on their native language and their culture, so a word like “glance” may carry a different meaning than you intend. Yet we heedlessly write e-mails as if we're talking to our next-door neighbor.

Deploying e-mail protocols

Some businesses have tried to establish “e-mail protocol” – guidelines for the proper use of this technology. And the fact is, investing in e-mail protocol actually saves time, because improving communication offsets confrontations between team members and improves productivity. But



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regrettably, while well-intentioned and rich in good information, these protocol recommendations are routinely not taken seriously, often because they are too long and complex and because people are generally not accustomed to adhering to “standards” where correspondence is concerned.

To make matters worse, e-mail protocol is often deployed by simply “throwing it over the fence;” that is, casually distributing a handout during a staff meeting. The right way to deploy any protocol – and certainly this one – is to make it an important focus, train the users and reinforce its use by reviewing it regularly during staff meetings.

A starting point

Here are 15 solid suggestions for improving the quality and consistency of business e-mail in a distributed environment:

1. **Write and send with care.** E-mail is a very casual mode of communication, yet we often use it to discuss critical issues. When we do, it's critical to read and write giving the issue the importance and careful consideration it deserves. Focus your attention to ensure that you give the message your full concentration.
2. **Take full advantage of the subject line** to give a clear idea of content and/or action needed. When sending a Reply, remember to change the subject line if it needs changing. Don't just drag out an old e-mail from weeks ago and re-use it to cover a new topic without changing the subject line. And whatever you do, don't send the message itself in the subject line.
3. **Cover only one item of business** in each e-mail message. For distributed teams, e-mails have replaced the printed memo as announcement, reminder and call to action. We coach our clients to send separate messages with individual subject headings. This makes it easier for readers, allowing them to understand, review and react to each subject logically and individually.
4. **Clarify what actions are required** of each recipient – e.g., “John, please develop a database of all Midwestern customers by the end of this week.” “I will need the database by Wed., Nov. 16, at 2 p.m. EST, please.” Ambiguity here can cost the virtual team precious time. And remember that an action item is made up of three parts: 1) do what; 2) by whom; and 3) by when. Anything short of this and it's not a true action item.
5. **Include your contact information (telephone, address and fax)** in your signature. Give the recipient a way to reach you – easily.
6. **Be wary of emotionally charged content.** If you have something emotional to share, it's best to do it in person or on the phone. Understanding is gained through voice tone, body language and facial expressions. Too many people use e-mail as a shield to avoid unpleasant confrontations – and they end up alienating the recipient. If you won't say it to someone in person, don't say it in an e-mail.
7. **Don't use e-mail to deliver bad news.** Never use e-mail to chastise or criticize, and never (ever!) to deliver any other seriously bad news. A message that may seem reasonable to you can hit another person hard, and you won't know it since you can't see the reader's nonverbal cues. Any message that might have a major effect on an employee's life should be delivered face-to-face or at least over the phone.
8. **Apply a professional style.** Minimize the use of underlines, boldface, all-caps and exclamation points. These all have the same unpleasant effect as shouting at someone face-to-face.
9. **Acknowledge receipt.** In most cases, the sender is waiting for a reply from you, even if it's just an acknowledgement that you received the message. Consider that things may be “on hold” until you reply, which can impact productivity and decision-making. If you're the sender, say that you'd like acknowledgement.
10. **Respond promptly.** When you receive a request or an action item, take immediate action. For example, if someone is asking for a meeting date, let him or her know immediately of your availability or alternatives. It's not only the courteous thing to do, but you're also helping improve productivity. Likewise, if you're unable to take immediate action, let the other person know that. Never



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be a “black hole” – someone who doesn’t respond.

11. **Follow up quickly with new contacts.**

When someone sends you an e-mail saying that she wants to do business with you, call her on the phone immediately. It’s important to elevate the level of communication as soon as possible.

12. **Be judicious in your use of group addresses.**

There may well be no need to copy all 47 members of the team on every memo. Doing this often leads people to assume “someone else will handle it.” The hope is that someone else among those 47 people will do it, so “I don’t have to.”

13. **Forward with care.** If you forward a message you’ve received to another individual, cc the sender to let the sender know who else is reading the message. And review the entire content string it includes, to make sure it’s all appropriate for your recipient to see.

14. **Read – and edit – before you send.** As a form of written communication, e-mail represents you professionally, so send your best. And for particularly important messages, or any message composed in anger, treat the e-mail as if it were a traditional letter: write, print, read, revise and only then send.

15. **Spell-check before you send.** Never send an e-mail without first checking the spelling. Because e-mail is informal, we tend to write casually and thus create typos and other blemishes that can make the message difficult to read. Again, always send your best.

Let’s face it: e-mail is a convenient, fast and valuable tool in the distributed-team and virtual-business environment. Like any tool, it can facilitate or hinder communication. Used in concert with face-to-face meetings, e-mail is an exceptional way to share information, foster creative thinking and facilitate critical personal meetings.

Figure 1 in the following page

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Use Technology Wise					
<i>"Words" are only 7% of communication</i>					
	Words	Voice inflection	Immediate feedback	Body language	Touch and proximity
Face to face meetings	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Video conference	YES	YES	YES	YES	
Peer to peer video	YES	YES	YES	YES	
telephone	YES	YES	YES		
Chat rooms	YES				
E-mail	YES				
Fax	YES				
Intranets, blogs, and alike	YES				

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	Words	V
Face-to-face meetings	YES	
Video conference	YES	
Peer-to- peer video	YES	
Telephone	YES	
Chat rooms	YES	
E-mail	YES	
Fax	YES	
Intranets, blogs, etc.	YES	

Figure 1

The above diagram shows the most popular methods teams use to communicate and collaborate. Note that e-mail ranks low in the critical areas that ensure clear communication – it is missing the majority of the information humans need to communicate, such as facial expressions, body language, voice tone, etc. E-mail is a poor substitute for clear communication; one must be careful not to expect more of e-mail than it can provide, as convenient as it may be. When you must use e-mail, keep in mind its shortcomings, as shown above, plus any differences in language and culture.

