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PERSONAL BUSINESS

SHORTCUTS

What to Think About Before You Hit 'Send'

By ALINA TUGEND

It seems almost passé to write now about how to use e-mail. After all, haven't most of us moved past that to tweeting, texting, Facebooking and whatever the social network flavor-of-the-month is?

No. It's still a vital part of business communication (and personal, too, at least for those over 25 or so). Yet as common as e-mail is, far too many people don't know how to use it well — or understand the risks they run of using it inappropriately on the job.

"The death of e-mail has been greatly exaggerated," said Mike Song, chief executive of GetControl.net, which provides training on time management and e-mail efficiency. Research by his company has found that most employees spend at least a third of their time at work on e-mail.

And while many people do use LinkedIn, Facebook and instant messaging, none of those outlets have replaced e-mail, for the most part, but they have added yet another method of communicating — and another way to waste time.

Don't get me wrong. I use e-mail all the time. It makes my personal and professional life immeasurably easier. But just because it's commonplace doesn't mean we use it properly and productively.

I found helpful (and amusing) an e-mail check list first issued by Seth Godin, a blogger and author of numerous books, about three years ago and recently reposted because he felt most people still misuse and abuse e-mail.

The No. 1 question to ask yourself before hitting "send" on the next e-mail, Mr. Godin says, is this: "Is this going to one person?"

He's referring, of course, to the

annoying "reply all" button. Mr. Song found that most professionals say their colleagues use "reply all" too frequently, but say they themselves hardly use it.

If you are "replying all," Mr. Godin says to then ask yourself: "Have I really thought about who's on my list? And if I didn't send it to them, would they complain about not getting it? If they wouldn't complain, take them off!" he admonishes.

Many experts, including Email replies.com, a Web site on e-mail etiquette, offer additional handy advice on appropriate procedures and ways to get the best answers to your messages, including these:

¶ Use "cc" sparingly.

¶ Make one point per e-mail. If you have more than one point, send separate e-mails. (I've found this to be true. If you add a second topic to an e-mail, the recipient often fails to notice it.)

¶ Be mindful of your tone. Bend over backward to make sure that things don't get lost in translation in your writing. Sarcasm is especially dangerous.

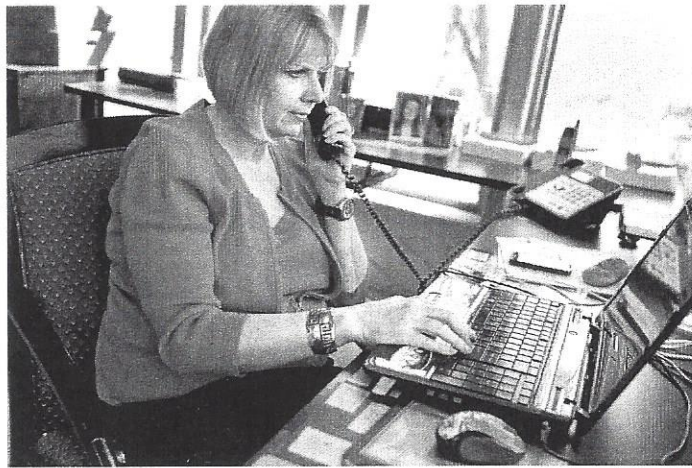
¶ Don't overuse the high-priority flag. Remember the boy who cried (or e-mailed) wolf.

¶ Don't forward chain e-mails. Don't forward chain e-mails. Don't forward chain e-mails.

¶ Use proper grammar and punctuation.

This last one is important for everyone, but particularly for anyone more used to texting, with all the jargon and shortcuts that are part of that, said Lisa Orrell, who writes about and conducts workshops on generational trends in the workplace.

When older people get e-mails from people in their 20s, "with all the acronyms and abbreviations, they don't fully understand them and it can lead to miscommunication," she said.



ANDREW SPEAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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tion," she said. The younger people, on the other hand, get frustrated with e-mail, "which they see as a slow game of Pong, while texting is playing Wii."

Ms. Orrell also hears complaints that too many younger workers — and this can probably apply to employees of all ages — think once they write an e-mail and hit the send button, the task is accomplished.

"They have to get a lot better at doing follow-up and continuing the dialogue," she said. "If an order doesn't get placed, you don't just send one e-mail and forget about it."

While it may seem particularly old-fashioned, I've found that sometimes it's better to get off the computer and make a phone call. If e-mails are getting too complicated, if the tone seems to be degenerating, if they're just not getting the job done, call or walk over to that colleague.

And if you have any fears that a work e-mail may get you in trouble, don't send it.

A lot of people also don't realize that "e-mail creates the electronic equivalent of DNA," said Nancy Flynn, founder and executive director of the ePolicy Institute, a corpo-

rate training and policy consulting firm. "There's a really good chance of e-mails being retained in a workplace's archives, and in case of a lawsuit, they could be subpoenaed."

For that reason, "You never want to use the company's system to discuss private business," she said. "Even if your boss is not retaining the e-mails, the recipient might."

Researchers for the American Management Association and ePolicy Institute who surveyed 586 companies estimate that as many as a quarter of bosses have fired an employee for some sort of e-mail violation.

"People lose their jobs and embarrass themselves and their families," Ms. Flynn said. "Once you type it and click 'send,' you're not getting it back. If I were an employee I would not transmit another e-mail until I looked at the company's e-mail policy."

But the contents of an e-mail and who you send it to are just part of the issue. There's also the question of how quickly you respond.

Long gone are the days when you sent out a message and assumed you would get an answer in a day or two. That's the snail mail equivalent

of waiting for your letter from the Pony Express.

Rather, now most of us expect to get a response almost instantaneously. I sent out two e-mails to contact sources for this article on a Sunday afternoon, for instance. Within half an hour, I had heard back from both parties.

"A telephone is synchronized communication and an answering machine is asynchronous," Mr. Godin said. "E-mail started as asynchronous, which was great, but now it's not."

The reality, Mr. Godin said, is that "very successful people answer e-mails once a day."

"It gives me a great deal of satisfaction to empty my in-box, and makes me happy in the short run, but I'm certain that it makes me less productive," he said. "If you're playing net at doubles at the U.S. Open, you need to have a four-second response. Otherwise you don't."

Simon Rich, a humor writer, took up this concept in an essay he wrote called, "The only e-mails I could receive that could justify the frequency with which I check my e-mail," in his book "Free-Range Chickens" (Random House, 2008).

These include an invitation to go to paradise with the girl of his dreams — if he replies within three minutes. Or an offer to be one of a handful of people to escape an asteroid about to hit Earth — if he replies within three minutes. And so on.

But since most of us aren't going to face such choices, why do we keep checking our e-mail?

For one, it's a great distraction. "In the old days, writers didn't have e-mail, they had whiskey," Mr. Godin said. "Now it's O.K. to spend four hours cleaning out your e-mail box."

Second, "it's an obsession with something new," Mr. Song said. "Something delivered to our in-box feels new and we have to look at it."

But the reality is, most e-mails are not worth the time they take to read. In fact, that leads to Mr. Godin's last suggestion on his e-mail checklist: If you had to spend the price of a stamp to send this e-mail, would you? The answer, I suspect, all too often is no.