Send the Right Messages About E-Mail

BY DIANE B. HARTMAN AND KAREN S. NANTZ

This two-pronged approach to managing e-mail—establishing clear policies and training employees—can help your organization communicate clearly and stay out of legal hot water.

Alicia, a training director, worked with the computer-services department of her mid-size company to train all employees to use the firm's electronic-mail network. Her classes thoroughly covered the nuts and bolts of e-mail, including how to send, store, retrieve, and reply to messages.

Within a year after the e-mail system was implemented, virtually all of the firm's employees were using e-mail regularly, taking advantage of the system's speed and access to internal and external resources. Alicia considered her mission accomplished.

Then, an employee wrote a letter attacking another company's marketing practices. The employee delivered the letter via the firm's e-mail system to several external electronic news groups. The other company slapped both Alicia and her firm with a libel suit.

Eventually, Alicia's organization had to pay millions of dollars in damages. Alicia and her firm learned the hard way that training employees about the how-tos of e-mail is essential but insufficient.

Alicia's story is fictional, but a similar tale involving a brokerage firm is not.

In *Davis v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner, and Smith Inc.,* Merrill Lynch had to pay $2 million in punitive damages because one of its brokers conducted fraudulent trading. The firm fired the broker once it discovered the scheme. Nonetheless, the courts held the company responsible because the employee had used the company's e-mail system to perpetrate the fraud. The ruling found that the firm had a duty to control and regulate information that had originated with the company and been sent over the network.

Cases such as that one underscore the potential for e-mail abuse. Increasingly, e-mail systems provide communication links among organizations. The potential for legal trouble multiplies as networks expand. To avoid placing themselves at legal risk, companies must support e-mail training with clear policies.

An effective organizational e-mail policy addresses the following points:

Ownership. Some companies stake out the legally defensible position that they own the contents of their e-mail and retain the right to monitor employees' messages. (See "Who Owns E-Mail?" on page 61.) If a firm decides that it will monitor e-mail, it must communicate the policy clearly to all employees.

Personal use. Personal communications—from sharing a joke with co-workers to conducting on-line conversations with faraway relatives—can overload an e-mail system and lower employee productivity. (In an extreme example, an enterprising bank employee used his firm's e-mail network to run a lucrative and illegal sports-betting operation.)

Businesses should establish policies that discourage employees from cluttering their e-mail systems with personal messages. If a firm decides to allow employees to use its e-mail system for personal communications, the firm's policy should say so and should spell out acceptable and unacceptable uses.

Storage. If e-mail systems are not purged periodically, they run out of space. Firms should establish e-mail storage policies similar to their policies for filing paper documents. E-mail policies should spell out procedures for backing up, filing, and periodically purging e-mail messages.

Who Owns E-Mail?

From a practical as well as a legal standpoint, e-mail exchanges are not as private as telephone conversations. Unlike phone conversations, e-mail messages can be retrieved, and even subpoenaed for court cases.

Depending on a system's software and configuration, e-mail messages might remain stored on a back-up system even after users delete them from their electronic mailboxes. Under certain circumstances, it's even possible to recover messages after they have been deleted from a back-up system.

E-mail messages have figured in a variety of workplace-related lawsuits, including allegations of sexual discrimination, unlawful discharge, sexual harassment, theft of company secrets, hazardous working conditions, and contract disputes.

Because businesses have been held liable for e-mail messages sent by employees, some companies contend that they own the contents of their e-mail just as they own more tangible assets. And they assert their right to inspect all messages in their systems. This new aspect of privacy law remains hazy, but legal precedent does support their contention. No federal law protects the privacy of employees' e-mail.

Nonetheless, employees probably won't use e-mail very effectively if they believe Big Brother is reading every word they write. Barbara Kantrowitz, writing in the December 20, 1993, *Newsweek*, compared the contents of an employee's e-mailbox to the contents of his or her in-box. The company technically owns the contents, but the law doesn't make clear that your boss, or any other employee for that matter, can waltz in at any time and read the material.

When devising e-mail policies, companies should balance their need to protect proprietary information and to avoid legal action against their employees' needs for privacy. Companies that want to exercise their right to monitor e-mail should do the following:

◗ Establish clear procedures for doing so.

◗ Identify the person who will monitor the system (most firms will designate a system administrator).

◗ Establish a group that includes employee representatives to enforce the monitoring policy by addressing related claims of e-mail abuse and employee grievances.

Security. Company policies should address not only equipment security but also message security. Employees need instructions and a timetable for changing their e-mail passwords regularly. During training, instructors should address such issues as sending e-mail from a co-worker's computer and attaching unauthorized messages to another person's message.

Tone. Many employees feel free to use e-mail for spirited and even critical discussions with their co-workers about company projects and procedures. But users who send inflammatory messages can ignite legal firestorms. An e-mail policy should make clear that the firm expects users to communicate with courtesy and restraint to both internal and external recipients. (See "E-Mail Etiquette" on page 65.)

When we surveyed more than 300 e-mail users in companies across the United States, we found that information-systems specialists and computer specialists deliver most e-mail training. We also found that most e-mail training covers hardware and software, operating procedures, security procedures, and file management.

Our survey suggests that technical trainers pay little or no attention to message content, format, style, and etiquette.

Electronic-mail systems—like telephones and fax machines—change the way employees communicate and relate to each other. Trainers can help companies manage these changes by preparing employees to communicate effectively through this new medium.

Consider addressing the following issues when you develop e-mail training.

Remember the receiver

When people use computers as communication tools, they sometimes forget that they are communicating with other people, not with machines. To keep your receiver's needs in mind, ask yourself the following questions before sending an e-mail message:

▸ What does my receiver know?
▸ What does my receiver need to know?
▸ What does my receiver want to know?

▸ What will my receiver think, say, and do in response to this message?
▸ Does my receiver have special needs to consider?

Consider carefully who needs to receive your messages. E-mail usually enables you to send messages to everyone in your organization, and sometimes to many people outside, as well. But should you?

When e-mail boxes become clogged with unnecessary messages, the system impedes communication instead of enhancing it. Most respon-

dents to our survey report that they receive an average of 50 e-mail messages each day, and some receive as many as 200 a day. To avoid information overload, establish distribution guidelines. Usually, you need to share information only with people who will help solve a problem or make a decision.

If you respond to a message that has been distributed to a group, think carefully about whether you need to reply only to the sender of the message or to the entire group.

Figure 1: Evaluating Communication Channels

The communication channel you choose will vary depending on the type of message you need to send. The following chart highlights the strengths of various communication channels, but it is not a definitive description.

Consideration Is the channel well-suited to...	Channels					
	Interoffice or regular mail (printed documents)	Telephone conversation	Voice mail	Facsimile transmission	Electronic-mail	Face-to-face meeting (two or more people)
delivering a long message?	X	—	—	—	—	X
delivering a short message?	X	X	X	X	X	—
delivering a formal message?	X	—	—	—	—	X
delivering an informal message?	—	X	X	X	X	
reaching an internal audience?	—	X	X	—	X	X
reaching an external audience?	X	X	—	X	X	—
providing a permanent record for the sender?	X	—	—	X	X	—
providing a permanent record for the receiver?	X	—	—	X	X	—
reaching widely dispersed receivers?	X	X	X	X	X	—
reaching narrowly dispersed receivers?	—	X	X	X	X	X
reaching many receivers simultaneously?	—	—	—	—	X	X
reaching one receiver at a time?	X	X	X	X	—	—
delivering attachments or support materials?	X	—	—	—	X	X
delivering information immediately?	—	X	X	X	X	—
maintaining confidentiality?	X	—	—	—	—	X
avoiding confusion caused by language or cultural differences?	X	—	—	—	—	X
keeping proprietary or other sensitive information secure?	X	—	—	—	—	X
allowing parties to address human concerns, such as emotions and relationships?	—	X	—	—	—	X

Automatically and unnecessarily replying to all members of a group bogs down the system, clutters people's e-mail boxes, and wastes time.

To e(-mail) or not to e(-mail)

In some instances, employees should not use e-mail at all to communicate. (See figures 1 and 2.) Using e-mail might have negative consequences—for example, if a private message becomes public.

Suppose you must tell employees that your firm plans to downsize, and you plan to brief them about the effects of layoffs on their health insurance, sick leave, vacation, and retirement benefits. You could send a companywide e-mail message, distribute a memo, leave a message on a telephone voice-mail system, or talk with employees in person.

If you send an e-mail message, you'll reach everyone quickly with

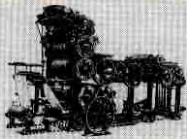## Figure 2: Selecting a Communication Channel for a Sample Message

You can use the following matrix to select a communication channel that is appropriate for your message. For example, suppose you must tell employees that your firm plans to downsize, and you must explain and document the effects that layoffs will have on their health insurance, sick leave, and other benefits. Select your primary considerations and mark the communication channels that best meet your needs.

Consideration	Channels					
Is the channel well-suited to...	Interoffice or regular mail (printed documents)	Telephone conversation	Voice mail	Facsimile transmission	Electronic-mail	Face-to-face meeting (two or more people)
delivering a long message?	X					X
delivering a short message?						
delivering a formal message?	X					X
delivering an informal message?						
reaching an internal audience?		X	X		X	
reaching an external audience?						
providing a permanent record for the sender?	X			X	X	
providing a permanent record for the receiver?	X			X	X	
reaching widely dispersed receivers?						
reaching narrowly dispersed receivers?						X
reaching many receivers simultaneously?					X	X
reaching one receiver at a time?						
delivering attachments or support materials?	X				X	X
delivering information immediately?		X	X	X	X	
maintaining confidentiality?	X					X
avoiding confusion caused by language or cultural differences?	X					X
keeping proprietary or other sensitive information secure?	X					X
allowing parties to address human concerns, such as emotions and relationships?		X				X

In this example, the most Xs appear in the column under face-to-face meeting, which indicates that this is your best choice.

Sometimes a single consideration will outweigh all others. In this example, employees are likely to need immediate, personal attention after you deliver the news about layoffs. This consideration alone would point to a face-to-face meeting as your best choice. Under other circumstances, you would need to weigh your options and decide.
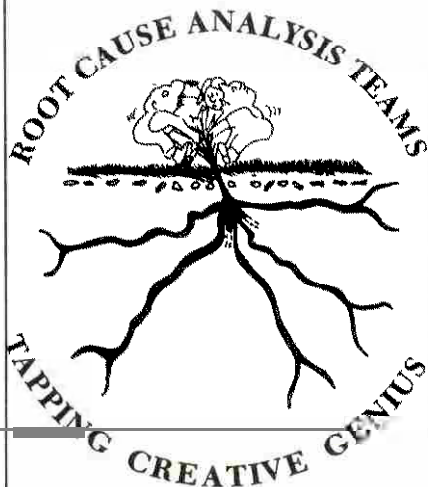
this vital information. But because employees are likely to react emotionally and negatively to an announcement about layoffs, you probably would want to deliver the information face-to-face in small groups. Employees' needs for personal attention in the wake of distressing news outweighs the value of e-mail's speed and efficiency.

Express yourself

One of the drawbacks when e-mail replaces a face-to-face conversation is that words on a computer screen often fail to convey intent or emotion. Nonverbal communication accounts for about 93 percent of an effective message. To compensate, e-mail users sometimes use abbreviations and "emoticons." (See "Abbreviated E-Mail" and "Emoting On-Line.")

If you use such forms of e-mail shorthand, be sure everyone in the company understands them. If you use e-mail shorthand, define each abbreviation or emoticon the first time you use it: "LOL (laughing out loud) I could hardly contain myself."

Some firms consider abbreviations and emoticons unprofessional and discourage their use, at least for external e-mail messages. In particular, if your company uses e-mail internationally, you should avoid shorthand as well as idioms and slang.

Emoting On-Line

If your company policy and culture allows, spice up your e-mail with the following "emoticons." (To view the symbols, turn the page 90 degrees to the right.)

:->	smiley
8->	smiley with glasses
:-(	sad
>-<	angry
:-D	laughing
:-@	screaming
;)	winking, flirting, or expressing sarcasm
:,(	crying
%-(	confusion
>:->	devilish remark
:-X	sealed lips
:*	kiss
:Q	smoking
:P	stick out tongue

Abbreviated E-Mail

Here is a glossary of common abbreviations used in e-mail messages.

BTW	by the way
FAQ	frequently asked question
FWIW	for what it's worth
FYI	for your information
IMO	in my opinion
LOL	laughing out loud
MSGS	messages
NLT	no later than
PLS	please
PRES	presentation
QTY'S	quantities
REC'D	received
RFC	request for comments
RGDS	regards
RTM	read the manual
THX	thanks
TMRW	tomorrow
YR	your

Strive for succinctness

Some e-mail experts compare the first screen display of an e-mail message with the first few seconds of a face-to-face conversation. In both instances, a first glance offers a brief opportunity to make a positive impression. Consider the following suggestions for capturing your reader's interest quickly:

Compose subject lines carefully. In an e-mail message, the subject line is similar to the "regarding" line in a traditional memo. Except for the recipient's name, the subject line is the most important item in an e-mail message. Many e-mail users use the subject line as a tool for setting priorities.

In the subject line, concisely indicate the content of the message. Instead of giving a general description ("E-Mail Training"), be specific ("E-Mail Communication Training, November 21, Training Room 3A").

Don't dilute your own message. Stick to one topic when you send an e-mail message. If you try to cover too much ground, your reader might overlook some of your concerns.

Practice writing complete but succinct messages by using the following "get-SET" technique:

- State your purpose.
- Expand it with pertinent details.
- Tie the message up by summarizing or asking for action.

When you reply to a message, remind the sender what he or she asked for. If necessary, include relevant text from the original message. **Use graphics judiciously.** Typographic elements such as bullets and lists can attract attention, but you should use them sparingly. And remember that some systems will not transmit italicized or boldface text.

Do not type messages entirely in capital letters. Many users of electronic networks think of writing in all caps as "flaming," or shouting. Messages typed entirely in capital letters also are harder to read than text written in capital and lowercase letters. **Write carefully.** Write e-mail messages with the same care that you take with printed documents. Your grammar, spelling, and punctuation will affect others' perceptions of you. **Proofread.** Reread all messages before you send them. If your message will reach many people, or if it is more than an informal note, print a hard (paper) copy and proofread it carefully. It's easier to read a hard copy than text on a screen.

E-Mail Etiquette

Etiquette expert Letitia Baldrige said, "The swift efficiency of the computer world in which we live does not grant us license to substitute rudeness for manners."

As electronic networks have become widely accessible, an on-line "netiquette" has developed. Keep these politeness pointers in mind when you communicate electronically.

When sending an e-mail message:
‣ Assume the message is permanent.
‣ Choose your recipients carefully; don't inundate people with information they don't need.
‣ Use a conversational but courteous tone. Offer any criticism kindly—don't insult people.
‣ Clearly indicate when you are expressing your opinion and when you are sharing facts.
‣ Do not rant or use offensive language.
‣ Get to the point. Limiting your message to one screen of text is a good rule of thumb.
‣ Use e-mail to foster connections, not to avoid face-to-face encounters.
‣ Use e-mail creatively; for instance, to offer feedback, to brainstorm electronically, and to give brief, on-line training sessions.

When receiving e-mail messages:
‣ Promptly forward messages intended for other receivers.
‣ Promptly respond to messages. (But if a message makes you angry or upset, give yourself time to relax and reflect before you answer.)
‣ Periodically purge your e-mailbox.
‣ Don't interrupt your work whenever messages arrive.

Entering another universe

Office e-mail systems provide most people with their first entry into the expanding universe of electronic networks. International firms are building electronic networks that span oceans. Some firms are linking their internal networks to those of their suppliers. And more and more firms use their networks to gain access to the Internet. Establishing clear policies and traini˘g people to use e-mail effectively—and legally—will set employees on the right ramp to the information highway. ■

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