

Effective E-mail Communication Skills - a vital global skill

E-mails and other instant message tools have given us the power to be able to communicate instantly across the globe. I am able to visualize a line in Greg Chappels comment expressed on his views on Twenty Twenty Cricket and how it is different from traditional cricket. Chappel comments that the fundamentals of cricket – that of being a battle between bat and ball and in any cricket format, the duel is the same. The basics skills to play the game therefore are even more critical than ever before and there are no shortcuts to that.

However, given the instant nature of the game and the pressures surrounding it, each move is magnified with implications which are huge to the success or the failure of an individual or a team. Same is the case with e-mails. The fundamentals of this being a communication between the sender and the receiver remains the same but given its instantaneous impact to individual and large audiences simultaneously, the essence of communication has to be compacted at one level and magnified at another.

While in the information age, most of our communication is through the electronic medium through e-mails, SMS's and a wide variety of applications cropping up everyday, the amount of training focus given to this vital skill in formal education or in corporate training is grossly inadequate.

The assumption that all employable graduates / post graduates/ employees in a business / corporations are well versed in e-mail communication is a fallacy. A majority of e-mail communication in business today are of poor quality and in many cases are clear brand value destroyers. While the awareness exists of how poor communication can impact individuals / businesses, training employees and employment seekers in this critical skill does not seem to merit a lot of attention. Good professional organizations recognize the power of this channel of communication and invest in training their employees and create processes for electronic communication.

This basic primer is intended for those who do not have access to high quality training in e-mail communication. There are seven aspects to e-mailing which will help develop a basic understanding :

1. Understanding why E-mailing as a skill is so important ?
2. Some basics on structuring e-mails
3. Some basics on Mails sent to multiple recipients
4. Information overload today and how to be minimalistic in e-mail communication
5. Points to ponder upon before sending an e-mail
6. Guidelines for effective e-mails
7. Effective E-mail management

1. Let us first try and understand, why e-mailing as a skill is so important .

E-mails today while providing a cost effective medium of communicating has improved the efficiency of information exchange in multiples. It has made the world a small place and enables communication at the touch of a button. E-mailing has also helped keep excellent records retrievable instantaneously at any point of time.

E-mail speed is a critical component of individual and business success to such an extent that this has spiraled off a whole new business paradigm that of hand held devices and mobile phone enabled instruments that provide 24x7 access to people to receive and respond to such communication.

While overall efficiency has improved, the flip side to this is that the obsession to e-mailing has caused huge stress related problems as work now follow you wherever you are and has become second nature to us. People spend more than 40% of their time e-mailing and this single tool today has caused a huge information overload which people across the world are battling to manage all the time.

It is therefore extremely important to use e-mails efficiently in a way in which we are effective in communication, have good records, are well informed and also manage e-mails in a disciplined manner which vastly reduced the time we spend on it. E-mailing should thus reduce stress and improve all round efficiency and wellness. Is this is our goal, we need to learn more about e-mails.

2. How should I structure e-mails ?

The broad structure of the e-mail like any letter would be three.

- a) The Header (includes the address fields and the subject of the mail)
- b) The body of the mail
- c) The signature and disclaimer / confidential clauses if any

a) The Header (includes the address fields and the subject of the mail) – The address field have three possible entries

- 'To' – The recipients e-mail address needs to be entered in this field.
- 'CC'- suggests 'Carbon Copy'. Here enter the e-mail addresses of people who need to receive copies of the message.
- 'Bcc'- Blind carbon copy can be used to send a copy of the message to recipients without the knowledge of either the main recipients or the secondary recipients.
- 'Subject' – is a one line description of what the email is about. To ensure that your email gets read make the subject line brief yet detailed enough to accurately reflect the content of the message

b) The body of the e-mail is the message space. The fundamentals of effective letter writing apply here. This is where a lot of training is required to individuals on writing the body of the mail. Unfortunately, written communication quality is so varied among students, employees and the general audience that it is difficult to standardize the quality

of written content unless a specific methodology is laid down as a standard and employees of organizations / institutions are trained in the matter. The difficult part of this training is that the over confidence of people in their written communication is a huge mindset barrier in learning the language of effective communication. In simple terms, the body must reflect the communication in both the letter and the spirit. This would call for an appropriate choice of words, format, look and feel and emotion. Global communication experts recognize that this is the zone that gets most misinterpreted and this is the zone that needs training in a combination of skills – language skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills in specific cases, empathy and emotional intelligence, global cross cultural skills and understanding of interpretation possibilities.

In professional organizations, it is quite common to have draft communications read by multiple people to check for blind spots in communication and correct before it gets sent.

c) The signature and disclaimer / confidential clauses if any – This can ideally be templated with the closure greeting, Name and address details along with any disclaimers / confidentiality clauses if required and can be recalled at the press of a button for every mail.

3. Some basics on mails sent to multiple audiences

Mails intended for multiple audiences need to be carefully considered in terms of

- Is the tone of the mail appropriate ? Remember, more than 90% of communication is non verbal and not related to the words used. The tone of the mail is therefore the key driver to the perception it is likely to generate
- Are the words used consistent across the audience or open to multiple interpretations
- Use of “Bcc” - There are many reasons we might want to keep the additional recipient hidden, some of them good and others not so good. A not-so-good reason for this is when you conceal the other recipient because you know the addressee would not want the message known.
An appropriate reason if you are sending email on behalf of a business or organization, it may be especially important to keep lists of clients, members, or associates confidential and using bcc would be appropriate.
However, do not use bcc as a spying tool - Consider this : how would you feel when a message addressed to you might also have reached a number of other people, but you did not know who?
- Would there be any legal or regulatory considerations that you would need to take care of in such a mass mail – if so, it may be appropriate to insert an appropriately worded clause.

4. Information overload today and minimalism in e-mail communication

Most of those who use the e-mail system as a way of communication have a huge information overload and find it difficult to read mails in their entirety. Some

professionals on the move have hand held devices which makes it difficult to read long mails, sometimes the attachments do not open properly or if they do the text is unformatted and can't be read. Some tips on ensuring your communication is effective and read by the recipient are –

- Keep the message as short as possible
- Avoid using fancy graphics / electronic stationery. It increases the size of the mail and it may not open on slower machines
- Include sufficient descriptions of attachments.
- Rename attached files appropriately
- If the attachment is a short one and does not have many restrictions, it would be more appropriate to paste the contents into the body of the mail instead of sending as an attachment. Most people overloaded with e- mails set aside long mails or those with attachments to be read at a later time when convenient and in many cases forget to read it later.

5) Points to ponder on before sending an e-mail

Some points to ponder upon before sending an e-mail are:

- Is this email appropriate for the specific interaction – informal / professional / formal / friendly / global etc. ?
- How would the recipient react to such a mail ? Are the possible reactions desirable from my perspective ?
- Does the mail clearly outline the desired response?
- Are there any legal or regulatory implications that I need to keep in mind before sending a mail ?

6) Guidelines for effective e-mails

i. Keep it simple - A few tips on keeping mails simple

- Articulate your message clearly. Keep it short.
- Include the original message while replying.
- If your email contains multiple messages that are loosely related, you could number your points to ensure they all are read.
- Avoid jargon and abbreviations.
- Seek clarification on emails you do not comprehend before replying to them
- Put a double space between paragraphs
- Make links clickable.
- Use a simple readable font and an appropriate size.

ii. Exercise caution with Attachments

- Attachments take time to download , take needless space on your recipient's computer and sometimes do not open properly. Therefore, whenever possible put your information in the body of your email instead of using attachments.

- Send link instead of attachments if possible, provide username and password if necessary.
- Zip large files before sending.
- Before sending a Microsoft Word document check to see if track changes is off and all changes have been accepted.
- While sending or receiving an Excel file, be aware that it may have multiple sheets with additional data which may not be intended.
- Senders beware - it is often difficult to access different programs and attachments on a PDA thereby creating incorrect interpretation at the recipients end.

iii. Don't be hasty

- If you find yourself writing in anger, take a break. Take some time to cool off before you hit "send". Don't react in anger without weighing the consequences.
- Take the time to make your message look professional. Take some extra time reviewing your message before hitting send.
- Use spell check tools.

iv. Don't assume privacy / confidentiality

- Remember that emails are not necessarily confidential. Many companies retain the right to monitor employees' messages.
- Avoid controversial topics in emails such as religion, politics, sports, race, sexual preference and gender.
- If there is confidential information to disseminate, ensure that you indicate that it is confidential.

v. Distinguish between formal & informal situations.

- Use of smileys (☺ ☹), non-standard punctuations and spellings are signs of friendly intimacy, therefore not viewed as professional.
- By the same token don't use informal language when your reader expects a formal approach.
- Differentiate between formal and informal situations and frame your email accordingly.
- Avoid sending forwards with jokes, stories and quizzes from your work E-mail. It is not considered professional.

vi. Be courteous

- Respond promptly - Even if your reply is "Sorry, I am too busy to help you now," at least the recipient will not be waiting for your reply.
- If you are going to be inaccessible by e-mail do use an out of office message :
- If someone e-mails you a request it is perfectly acceptable to forward the request to a person who can help.
- All words in capital letters are read as an expression of anger.
- Avoid using foul language.

7) Effective E-mail Management

It is important to manage your e-mails to facilitate proper records and ease of retrieval. E-mail management also helps you organize your information properly so that this information can be converted into knowledge for you at any time and helps you to be a more effective professional. While many organizations advocate specific processes for e-mail management, as a general rule, it is important to set up appropriate folders and index mails appropriately. Old mails need to be archived regularly so that they do not clog up the network bandwidth. From a time management perspective, it helps to identify specific times when you will check your mails instead of doing it all the time.

While most of this may seem very basic, rigorous discipline in e-mail communications is a critical global skill for all of us who use the computer everyday as a means of communication.