

Communication Guru™

Tips, best practices, and resources for effective communication



by Debra Hamilton

The Abuse of E-mail and Its Impact on Work Relationships

E-mail use continues to exponentially grow with nearly 100 billion e-mail messages sent per day worldwide. The convenience and expediency of e-mail has resulted in abuse and overuse of the tool—often creating a climate of dissension. In brief interviews, here are what people have disclosed as some of the pitfalls of e-mail.

- People don't get their point across.
- It is used as a CYA tactic instead of communication.
- People don't know who should respond to what, causing overuse of the "reply to all" function.
- E-mail messages that are ambiguous, vague, or lack necessary detail to act on.
- E-mails without summaries that refer back to previous conversations/decisions.
- Numerous ASAP/urgent e-mails that lack the context of the emergency.
- Haste, inappropriate tone, and inadvertent actions that put people and businesses at risk.
- E-mail used as a discussion to solve problems or resolve conflict which often escalates the conflict and damages relationships.

Despite its popularity, people point to e-mail as a major cause of work-related stress and strained working relationships. Here are some guidelines for taming the e-mail beast.

1. Decide if e-mail is your best choice for communicating. Think first before using e-mail. Do not use e-mail to solve major problems, resolve conflict, dish out reprimands or criticism, communicate tight deadlines, or handle sensitive matters. In these cases, replace e-mail with a phone call or meeting. A brief phone call is often more efficient and can replace dozens of poorly constructed e-mail messages bouncing back and forth.

Overuse and abuse of email
can result in strained
relationships and stress.

2. Limit the volume of e-mail. The more e-mail going back and forth, the more frustration and opportunity for error, misinterpretation, wasted time, and hurt feelings. When you are caught in a series of e-mail messages, know when to cut the thread and pick up the phone.

3. Avoid using e-mail as a CYA tactic. In organizations where trust is low, people routinely "copy" everyone to cover themselves. This strains relationships and wastes time. A person should be copied when they are directly involved with the task and need to be aware of progress. Avoid copying to escalate an issue.

4. Respect your reader's time. Be ultra clear as to why you are writing and what you need. Focus on one issue per e-mail and give the reader specific details to help that person respond. Also, allow for a 24-hour response time. If your message is more urgent, call.

5. Use e-mail to build workplace relationships. Our busy global landscape limits face-to-face interaction with others. As a result, e-mail continues to be the prevailing tool for communicating and building relationships. Show respect for readers by sending a well-organized message with the appropriate "body language" to carry a positive tone. Use *please* and *thank you*. Insert phrases such as *I appreciate your help with this*. Go the extra mile for your colleagues and customers to reinforce the working relationship.

Questions & Quandaries . . .

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