

KINDER, GENTLER, SAFER EMAILING

University of Miami Ethics Programs

WHY WORRY ABOUT EMAIL?

- **Professionalism** – What you put in email reflects on you, and on the organization.
- **Efficiency** – Email is supposed to save time and effort. Bad email doesn't.
- **Liability** – You can break the law, and risk a lawsuit too, if you're not careful. (Really!)

SUGGESTIONS FOR COURTESY AND SAFETY

We have one general suggestion: *Think before you type. Think again, after you type, before you click on the SEND button.* Once sent, email can almost never be recalled successfully. Although most email gets to its destination safely, you cannot really control where yours will go, where or how long it will be stored, or who will see it.

Think of email as an electronic postcard, potentially readable by every computer user on the planet. It's true that some email systems are much safer than others (such as those that offer encrypted links and messaging). But even these safer options cannot prevent problems caused by correspondents' carelessness or discourteousness – or by an insecure computer at either end of the "conversation."

Don't let the comparison to a postcard lull you into thinking of email as an informal means of communication. Despite its insecurities, email can be – and in numerous court cases has been – considered an official, legally-binding document of the organization. If you're not careful about what you write, sooner or later you're going to get burned.

- **Always be concise. Less is more.** Most people already get an overwhelming volume of email. Help them by keeping your messages short and sweet. (Maybe they'll do the same for you.) If you have a lot to say, or the content may be emotionally-laden, consider using the telephone. It's more personal, and there's less chance of misunderstanding.
- **Send fewer emails. Less is more.** Try to consolidate the emails you must send. If someone sends you several emails on the same subject, read them all before replying.
- **Use a meaningful "subject" line.** Many people use the "subject" field to identify a particular message from among the hundreds or thousands in their inboxes and folders. Help them, please.
- **Use an appropriate greeting to start.** If you have a formal relationship, use "Mr.," "Ms.," or a formal title like "Dr.," the same way you would in a letter. For persons you know well, more informal greetings are OK – e.g., "Dear Donna," "Hi Donna," or "Donna:".... Typing a polite greeting takes very little time, and it can also help with spotting spoofs. Omit it only if you're *sure* the recipient prefers that you get right to the point.
- **Watch your language.** You will not be there when the message is read, to explain what you "really meant to say" – another reason to be clear and concise. Even if you consider a message "private," you have no idea where an email will end up. (Not everyone is as careful as you are about forwarding and copying.) Don't use language that might be considered libelous, obscene,

offensive, defamatory, racist, sexist or ...well, you get the idea. *Always be extremely careful about including any information that might be considered confidential.*

- **Watch other's language when you forward or copy messages.** As a matter of courtesy to your correspondents, be extremely careful about re-sending what others send to you. Consider the audience that the original sender intended. *In general, do not re-send others' messages to you on to a broader audience without permission.*
- **You are judged by what carries your name, even if you're not the originator.** Never forward material that may be considered libelous, obscene, offensive, defamatory, racist, sexist or ...well, you get the idea. *(And, of course, don't write it yourself in the first place.)* As for chain letters, hoaxes, and other garbage (spam) – don't forward it, don't reply to it.
- **Be obsessive about grammar and spelling.** Errors in spelling and grammar lead to confusion. And they can make you look stoopid. Or sloppy. Or both.
- **Pay attention to format.** Don't obsess, but make sure your messages are easy to read. Short paragraphs, with blank lines between, are a good idea. (Short sentences are nice too.)
- **Use emoticons, CAPITALIZATION, and punctuation sparingly!!!!!!** Try to convey with your careful choice of words that you feel ☺ or ☹ or otherwise. Emotion-signaling graphics (emoticons) and wild punctuation are usually inappropriate in business email. So are abbreviations like BTW, LOL, IMHO, etc. (Limit those to your personal email.)
- **Be conservative (and careful) about sending attachments.** Consider whether anything in an attachment might be too confidential for email transmission. (Be careful too about hidden information that many office software products put in files.) *As a courtesy to recipients, every attachment you send should be scanned by up-to-date anti-virus software.* If your computer isn't protected by anti-virus software, you shouldn't be using email.
- **Be careful about attachments you receive.** While we're on the subject, be extremely cautious about attachments in inbound email too. These are the primary source of viruses and other malicious software (malware). Your anti-virus software should be configured to automatically scan all attachments before opening; but even then, you can never be 100% certain that it will catch everything.

Never open an attachment if you have doubts about the source. Don't click on links in suspicious email either. Remember that the source of an email is easy to fake. Moreover, some malicious software can take control of a victim computer's email system. A message isn't guaranteed to be safe just because it appears to come from a person or organization you know. If anything appears suspicious, contact the sender – by telephone!

- **Include an appropriate "signature" at the end.** This should identify your name, title and organization; and it should include your address and telephone numbers. Omit this only if you're *sure* recipients have this information – don't make them search for it. Religious and political sentiments, inspirational quotations, cartoons, etc., are usually inappropriate in business email signatures. (Limit those to your personal email.)

- **If the information is confidential, include an appropriate “confidentiality notice.”** This is required by most organizations’ privacy policies. But the legal protection it affords is open to debate, and it won’t undo damage caused by carelessness. You still must always ask yourself: *Do I really need to send this information via email in the first place? Am I sending only what’s needed to get the task done? Have I gotten the recipients’ addresses correct?*
- **Try to respond promptly.** If nothing else, you’ll be spared the “did you get my previous email?” email or telephone call. (If you can’t give a full reply promptly, it’s still a nice touch to acknowledge receipt in a brief message and promise to follow up later.) But don’t be too prompt. Remember to re-read before you send – and check that you have the right addresses.
- **Be patient when others don’t respond promptly.** Don’t expect an immediate answer. Not everyone is chained to their computer 24/7. *If you really need an immediate response, it’s time to use the telephone.* Remember that with spam-blocking, your email may sometimes get intercepted by mistake. That’s a more common problem now, since almost every email system has some kind of spam blocker.
- **Beware multi-tasking.** It’s common to read and write email while doing other things. Unfortunately, most of us aren’t nearly as good as we think at doing more than one thing at a time – so multi-tasking can be a recipe for errors. Inattention to the details of email can get you into trouble, for all the reasons we’ve listed here.

OTHER TIPS

- **Delivery and “message read” receipts** – These are often blocked by the recipient, or unsupported by his/her email software in the first place. If you *really* need to know, and can’t wait for a reply, pick up the telephone.
- **Printing** – Aside from killing more trees, a propensity to PRINT creates copies that you generally can’t find when you need them. It’s usually easier to rely on your email system’s search engine. Printed copies of email floating around are also a security issue. If you print it, make sure you file it or dispose of it safely.
- **Priorities** – Many users ignore priority symbols, as well as words like IMPORTANT AND URGENT. (Sorry, it’s true.) If it’s really a high-priority message, pick up the phone.
- **Recalls** – Usually ineffective because the message has already been delivered. Send the corrected message with an explanation. (Try to get it right the first time.)
- **Reply to all** – An over-used feature! Consider whether everyone really needs to see your reply, or just a select few. For both security and politeness, be careful who you add by “cc” and “bcc” too. While we’re on the subject, are you sure you’ve got all the addresses right? Check again.

► **Questions and comments about this document are welcome. Send email to ethics@miami.edu.**