

# SAFER INSTANT MESSAGING

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## WHY WORRY ABOUT INSTANT MESSAGING?

- **Professionalism** – What you put in workplace IM reflects on you, and on the organization.
- **Efficiency** – IM can save time and effort. It can also be a time-waster and an annoyance.
- **Liability** – You can break the law, and risk a lawsuit too, if you're not careful. (Really!)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR COURTESY AND SAFETY

The first suggestion is specific: Find out if IM is allowed at your organization, and if so what kind. For security reasons, many organizations prohibit the installation of public IM clients (such as those from AOL, MSN or Yahoo). The second suggestion is general, and it's the same one we give for electronic mail (email): *Think before you type. Think again, after you type, before you click on the SEND button.* Once sent, IM cannot be recalled.

Just as with email, think of IM as an electronic postcard, potentially readable by every computer user on the planet. It's true that some IM 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 IM as an informal means of communication. Despite its insecurities, IM can be – and in a few 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.

In this respect, IM you send as part of work activities is much different than IM for personal reasons. Personal IM is intended to be informal and quick. Workplace IM, though it can be equally quick, is not legally informal!

- **Always be concise. Less is more.** Most people already get an overwhelming volume of communications – via telephone and voice mail, email, and now IM. Help them by keeping your messages short and sweet. (Remember that IM is supposed to be for brief messages!)
- **Send fewer IMs too.** Same reasons as above. Also consider this: 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.
- **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. (IM is probably not the best way to communicate with such persons!) For persons you know well, more informal greetings are OK – e.g., “Dear Donna,” “Hi Donna,” or “Donna:”.... Typing a polite initial 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 IM 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 IM transcript will end up. 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 IM content.** As a matter of courtesy to your correspondents, be extremely careful about re-sending what others IM to you. Consider the audience that the original sender intended. *In general, do not re-send others’ message content to you on to a broader audience without permission.*
- **You are judged by what carries your name, even if you’re not the originator.** As with email, ever include 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. Remember that workplace IM is official correspondence, even if it seems “informal.”)*
- **Be obsessive about grammar and spelling.** Errors in spelling and grammar lead to confusion. And they can make you look stoopid. Or slopppy. Or both. This is another respect in which workplace IM is different than personal IM. For the latter, abbreviations and other informal constructions are expected.
- **Pay attention to format.** Don’t obsess, but make sure your messages are easy to read. Short sentences, with blank lines between, are a good idea. In IM, you normally only type a sentence or two before sending. Don’t write a novel.
- **Use emoticons, CAPITALIZATION, and punctuation sparingly!!!!!!** Yes, even in IM this is a good idea – at least in the workplace. Try to convey with your careful choice of words that you feel ☺ or ☹ or otherwise. Emotion-signaling graphics (emoticons) and wild punctuation are somewhat more acceptable in IM than in business email. So are abbreviations like BTW, LOL, IMHO, etc. But always remember that IM can end up being an official record.
- **Be conservative (and careful) about sending attachments.** Consider whether anything in an attachment might be too confidential for IM 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 IM.
- **Be careful about attachments you receive.** While we’re on the subject, be extremely cautious about attachments in inbound IM too. These are a 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 IM either.* Remember that the source of an IM can be faked. Moreover, some malicious software can take control of a victim computer. 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!

- **If the information is confidential, include an appropriate “confidentiality notice.”** This is required by most organizations’ privacy policies – although such policies may also limit or prohibit the sending of confidential material via IM. In any case, the legal protection these notices afford 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 IM in the first place*
- **Try to respond promptly, but be patient when others don’t** If you can’t give a full reply promptly, it’s still a nice touch to acknowledge receipt in a brief reply and promise to follow up later.) But don’t expect an immediate answer, even if the person’s “presence status icon” indicates they’re available. Not everyone is online 24/7, and many forget to change their status icon when they start other tasks or leave the computer.
- **Beware multi-tasking.** It’s common to read and write IM 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. Just as with email, inattention to the details of IM can get you into trouble, for all the reasons we’ve listed here.

► *Questions and comments about this document are welcome. Send email to [ethics@miami.edu](mailto:ethics@miami.edu).*