Electronic Media

This Teaching Note and the accompanying materials focus on two of the most widespread "new" types of electronic communication: electronic mail (e-mail) and voice mail (v-mail). While both are more than two decades old, the norms regarding their use are still largely in flux. As such, the norms and advice presented in this Teaching Note are based on a moving target. They represent a definition of acceptable behavior that is still emerging and still largely locally defined.

ELECTRONIC MAIL

Development and Current Usage

In 1984, there were an estimated 1 million e-mail users in the U.S. (Leslie 1994). By 1993, that figure had grown to at least 16 million North American users sending 5 to 6 billion messages and an additional 15 to 35 million users outside North America (Leslie 1994). By 1996, approximately 37 million workers in the U.S. had e-mail capacity and predictions had that number rising to 82 million by the end of 1999 (Opel 1999). The Electronic Messaging Association, representing more than 400 vendors, predicted even higher usage in 1999 — 94 million users sending more than 5.5 trillion messages (Marken 1998).

E-mail is clearly beginning to dominate business — and personal — life. Its inroads into communication have been so significant that Postmaster General Runyon predicted that much of the U.S. Postal Service's (USPS) $1.4 billion 1998 losses were due to e-mail, by which an estimated 40 percent of business and personal correspondence bypasses the USPS (Marken 1998).

Potential Benefits of E-Mail

For some, using e-mail is no different from exchanging formal memos (Leslie 1994) or informal postcards (Angell & Heslop 1994, Shea 1995); for others, it is a form of conversation or a hybrid, totally new form of interaction and communication. This difference in perspective reflects the emergent nature of e-mail as a medium for business communication. While it may share many of the aspects of paper-based types of communications, we believe it is new and different enough to warrant separate consideration. It has different norms for using it effectively, and different benefits and potential pitfalls.

In the last few years, the day-to-day operational benefits of e-mail have become so clear and so numerous that it now verges on being a condition for doing business. This shift is similar to the way that the telephone changed from being a competitive advantage or business luxury to being a necessary tool for general business. As the number of telecommuters and "virtual workers" increases, we expect e-mail will also become a taken-for-granted aspect of the modern workplace.

Both users and researchers agree about some of e-mail's other advantages. In general, most believe that it:

1) speeds communication and, thus, business;
2) enables changes in many core business practices and processes; allows expansion of personal and professional networks (intra- and extra-firm); supports incorporation of peripheral members of organizations;
3) allows for broader communication on key organizational issues;
4) supports geographically dispersed work (e.g., home offices, hotelling, virtual teams); and,
5) enables and expedites knowledge sharing.

Some users and researchers have also witnessed its potential to democratize organizations, encourage broader participation and sharing of ideas, flatten hierarchies, promote more informal work cultures, and offer a good opportunity for increased candor. Of course, whether such potential is realized depends in part on how individuals and organizations use it. In at least some cases, researchers have also shown that e-mail has been used to preserve existing hierarchies, support distancing behaviors (through its selective implementation or use), and limit the sharing of information (because some people are hesitant to document their expertise, some organizations see e-mail as a threat to corporate secrets, and many fear employers' widespread surveillance of e-mail).

Potential Pitfalls of E-mail

Despite e-mail's many benefits, there are also some clear pitfalls associated with its use. In this section, we present some of the most common (and dangerous).

Mis-sends

Because sending an e-mail message requires less effort than sending traditional paper messages, *mis-sends* are much more common. As a variety of examples attest, the fates of business deals and jobs "can rise or fall on a single typo" (Kelley 1999a). Whether it is by unintentionally forwarding something, replying to a broadcast message with an individually-directed comment, incorrectly using a e-mail address book, or other means, most e-mail users can tell at least one embarrassing story. A recent series on National Public Radio (NPR) highlighted such unintentional e-blunders. The NPR series and other reports include tales that range from personally embarrassing to "career-limiting." Examples include:

- An employee of a Big 5 firm mistakenly sent a message to all of the firm's partners that included three lists of "The Top Ten Things that Sound Dirty, but Aren't" at the office, in golf, and in law.   Within an hour, the mortified employee had learned of the errant e-mail and sent a follow-up message "`By a severe accident, I somehow sent out a very inappropriate [e-mail to all partners].   I am completely devestated [sic] and wish to express a very sincere apology.   I still cannot figure out how this happened and I can guarantee you that I would never abuse our system in such a manner. Please accept my apology and be assured that this will never happen again. I am so sorry to have disturbed you in any way.`"

- A graduate student at a major research university mistakenly sent all faculty a personal message that included comments about his spending more time overseas to see his girlfriend and (more damagingly) to "create some distance" between him and his advisors.

- An MBA student misdirected a personal message to all fellow students noting that "`I also normally don't advertise the fact that I'm a loser, but I got a double ding on Friday night. You guessed it ... McKinsey and Andersen both told me I don't have what it takes.`"

In all these cases, messages intended as private became public through a mistaken keystroke.

"Flaming"

In addition to such unintentional mis-sends, which are usually only harmful to the sender, there are numerous examples of messages that are derogatory, offensive, insulting, or simply express strong negative emotions. In the evolving vocabulary of e-mail, they are known as "flames" and sending them is called "flaming." Because e-mails can be written and sent to many people so quickly, they often get sent in the heat of anger or frustration and often don't get the amount of review or consideration that traditional messages would (or e-mails should).

In the last several years, broadcast e-mail messages at Sloan have spawned major controversies (and voluminous on-line exchanges known as "flame wars") because of their race-, gender-, or culturally-oriented references. As the following examples show, flame wars can result from a mis-read message, not necessarily an intentionally offensive one.

- Student A sent a detailed message regarding an intramural basketball team's performance to all students at Sloan. Annoyed by this mass e-mailing, Student B replied in a message that was also sent to the whole school. While Student B may have had a very valid point about Student A's questionable use of a broadcast distribution list, his point was buried within a message replete with thinly veiled vulgarities and two remarks that many considered to be racially insensitive. Ironically, Student B's valid point about the appropriate use of broadcast lists may have been lost in the wave of heated e-mails, on-line threats of violence, and charged hallway conversations that followed.

- In an announcement sent to all students, the Graduate Management Society (GMS) announced a C-Function where students could "Come scope out the women (or the men if you're so inclined) in next year's entering class." Regardless of the senders' intentions, the message was described by one respondent as "totally inappropriate, offensive, brainless, insensitive, chauvinist," etc. It spawned dozens of heated replies and some worried that it would adversely affect Sloan's recruiting.

- In a message sent to everyone at Sloan, one student questioned the strategic wisdom of accepting what he considered a "high" percentage of international students at Sloan. While a discussion about the composition of the student body and the appropriate target markets for the school could have been productive, his e-mail was perceived as offensive and led to dozens of replies (some of them intentionally offensive) and generated more heat than light.

Ultimately, such public exchanges serve to define the norms of appropriate and inappropriate e-mail usage. While no one would choose to have norms defined in such a heated and potentially harmful way, the exchanges highlighted the boundaries of acceptability in this community of users. In other communities, the original messages might have spawned very different responses (or not have spawned any at all). Such episodes highlight the local and emergent nature of both

the medium and norms regarding its use. They also highlight the need for individuals to be particularly sensitive to local norms in messages sent to an entire community. The Sloan and broader MIT administrations have both attempted to guide the development of those norms (e.g., see Fig. 1), but they have also recognized the largely self-regulated nature of e-mail. This recognition was exemplified in a recent message from Dean Schmalensee to the Sloan community (see Fig. 2). Also see the MITnet Rules of Use, http://web.mit.edu/olh/Welcome/rules.html#mitnet.

Figure 1. "Email Usage at Sloan," MIT Sloan Student Handbook

Electronic mail (email) has become an important means of communication at Sloan, and its proper use is thus of particular concern. Our email system exists first and foremost to foster communication among the student body, staff, and faculty, supporting Sloan's academic and community goals. The following guidelines should be observed to ensure professional, courteous email communication:

- We welcome free expression, but assume that it will be conducted in good taste and in the proper venue. Use the "boss rule" when crafting an email message (in other words, write each message in a commonsense, professional manner — as if it will be read by your boss or superior). Keep person-to-person messages private; do NOT copy, distribute, or share email messages sent to or from an individual with the larger Sloan community via the student distribution lists. Doing so is a serious violation of confidentiality.
- The student email distribution lists are collective email addresses for Sloan's various student cohorts (e.g., PhDs, MBAs, undergraduates, etc.) available for your use. They are a quick, convenient way to reach a large number of your student colleagues. With this convenience comes responsibility, however. The distribution lists are vehicles for sharing relevant information and announcements of interest to the entire Sloan community (or specific subsets of it), NOT for venting, frustrations, editorializing, "spamming," sharing person-to-person messages, or advertising.

Sending abusive, threatening, or disruptive messages, using email to harass or defame another person, inappropriately concealing your identity, misusing the student distribution lists, or other violations of Sloan or MIT policies may result in disciplinary action.

Fig. 2 Dean Schmalensee's Response to a "Flame War" at Sloan

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Date: Tue, 20 Apr 1999 17:14:43 -0400
To: students-admin@sloan.mit.edu
From: Richard Schmalensee <rschmal@MIT.EDU>

Dear Sloan Student,
It has been called to my attention that a recent invitation to a C-
function contained some inappropriate and unprofessional language.
This incident is unfortunate.  It is not my role to monitor or censure
student e-mail, but I hope that the student(s) responsible listen to
the reaction from their colleagues and learn from it.
Dick Schmalensee
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"Spamming"

E-mail also provides the potential for a broader category of e-mail offenses called "spams" — i.e., messages deliberately sent to a broadcast list or online discussion group when such a large distribution is considered inappropriate by members of the recipient list or group. Unlike flaming, which includes offensive or derogatory language, "spamming" is offensive solely because of a conflict between its distribution and its content. Common examples include commercial advertisements or sales pitches sent to non-commercial lists (Biersdorfer 1999). A recent survey of 13,000 e-mail users by the Gartner Group found that 90 percent receive at least one unwanted commercial message per week and half receive five or more such "spams" (WiWo 1999). It isn't always inappropriate to use e-mail to advertise one's services, but such advertisements are widely considered inappropriate when they are not in response to a specific request or directed at a specific individual.

Some people have begun identifying messages with "SPAM" as the first word in the subject line when they *are* aware that certain broadcast e-mails violate the norms of their on-line community. By doing so, they intend to make it easy for recipients to delete the messages quickly. When such messages are used infrequently and with genuinely good intentions (e.g., announcing a lost/found wallet), they appear to be acceptable in most communities. As they become more frequent and less nobly intended, on-line communities are forced to clarify their norms and sometimes create separate channels for such messages (e.g., on-line bulletin boards for "classified ads"). Some are also developing products to fight spam (Markhoff 1998).

System and Software Limitations

Because e-mail often passes from one system or software package to another, there are important limitations to e-mail in terms of formatting and attachments. Originally, all e-mail systems were limited to simple, unformatted ASCII text. Over time, e-mail systems have come to include many of the formatting capabilities available in word processing programs. However, the formatting features that are now possible in many e-mail packages (e.g., bold-facing, underlining, italicizing, coloring, aligning, bulleting) generally do not translate across packages or systems. What is intended as bold-facing or formatting comes across as strange, embedded codes. In fact, formatting in messages so *infrequently* transfers, that avoiding it altogether is still the safest course — unless you are sending a message that isn't going outside your own system (and is unlikely to be forwarded beyond it). Instead, use "low-tech" alternatives such as asterisks to bracket text that you want to italicize. For more on formatting issues and other low-tech, system-independent formatting conventions, see the section of this Note on "Netiquette."

In addition to avoiding built-in formatting, it is also safest to avoid tabs. If you have material that really depends on formatting, send an attached file (ensuring in advance that your recipient will be able to read it), a fax, or an "old-fashioned" but still important "snail mail."

Non-Verbal Cues

Much of the early research regarding e-mail focused on the effects of using a medium that did not allow for non-verbal cues. Given that the eyes, body, and inflection of one's voice transmit a tremendous amount of information above and beyond the words actually uttered, e-mail is often

characterized as a medium that is less "rich" than telephone, video-enhanced, or in-person communication.

Using emotional icons or "emoticons" (i.e., simple combinations of characters symbolizing smiles [:-)], frowns [:-(], winks [;-)], and other facial expressions) allows for some "visual" expression of emotion (see Fig. 3). These emoticons are also helpful for indicating sarcastic or humorous remarks, but you should be cautious when using emoticons that are less intuitive than the smile, frown, and wink. Without the verbal cues of face-to-face interaction, some humor (especially the dry or sarcastic kind) can easily be misinterpreted — especially by people who do not know each other well. Some e-mail style mavens recommend avoiding humor in e-mail altogether. When interacting with strangers or people whom you know on only a limited basis, this is probably worthwhile advice. However, with people you know well, e-mail can be a perfectly acceptable medium for expressing your sense of humor. In fact, because it lacks non-verbal cues, humor can often help personalize exchanges.

Fig. 3 Common Emoticons

:-)	Happy, pleased
:-(	Unhappy
;-)	Winking, sarcasm
:-o	Shocked, amazed
:-(O)	Yelling
:-D	Laughing
:-<	Very upset
X-(	Brain dead

People have also developed other short-hand methods to "enrich" their e-mails (see Fig. 4). While new features may continue to enrich e-mail (e.g., embedded graphics, video, audio), it is still not possible to communicate the tone, stance, posture, and other signals that one sends (intentionally and unintentionally) in face-to-face or video communications. Thus, as in paper-based written communication, users must depend on words to carry most of their meaning and use them especially carefully to avoid misunderstandings.

Information Overload

Proponents of e-mail emphasize its ability to "democratize" and "flatten" organizations. They point to its ability to involve many more people in organizational communications. However, there is some debate about whether e-mail actually increases or decreases the volume of communication. On one side of the debate, there are recent studies suggesting it reduces overall communication and negatively affects the character of the remaining communication. For example, in a 1999 *Harvard Business Review* article, Edward Hallowell, a noted Boston-area psychiatrist who treats many corporate executives, claims that e-mail leads to the demise of "human moments" in organizational life. Another recent article, reporting the results of a multi-year study (Sarbaugh-Thompson & Feldman 1998), indicates that as e-mail use increases, it may also be associated with declines in overall communication volume. They further report that the

reduction in overall volume of communication was in lost "greetings" that are less likely to be sent via e-mail.

Fig. 4 Common E-Breviations

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BFN         bye for now
BTW         by the way
FWIW        for what it's worth
FYI         for your information
HTH         hope this helps
IAE         in any event
IMHO        in my humble opinion
IMO         in my opinion
IOW         in other words
LOL         lots of luck
NRN         no reply necessary
OTOH        on the other hand
TIA         thanks in advance
TIC         tongue in cheek
TTYL        talk to you later
TYVM        thank you very much
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However, these two articles represent a limited sample and there are many other studies reporting that e-mail increases organizational communication. A recent Pitney Bowes study of major corporations found that a business professional either sends or receives an average of 190 messages daily. These aren't all via e-mail, but an increasing proportion are electronic. In fact, a cottage industry has sprung up to help people deal with the information overload that e-mail can create. Dealing with information overload is not a new problem, but e-mail (solicited and unsolicited) does seem to have exacerbated it for many.

As a result of information overload, messages can easily get lost. People can also send messages expecting replies, but forget to follow up. Tips for dealing with such issues and for coping with information overload are included under "Information Management" in the "Netiquette" section of this Note. In addition to following such tips, software is now available to screen out mail from particular people [a.k.a. "bozo filters" (Schrage 1997)]; other software also offers more "intelligent" assistance for managing e-mail. If all else fails, there are even "professional organizers" who can help (Lawlor 1999).

Personal E-Mail Issues

This section address two critical aspects of personal e-mail use — i.e., media choice and privacy. Specific tips for improving your use of e-mail are included in the subsequent sections on "Corporate and Work Group Policies" and "Netiquette."

Media Choice

As you conduct your business, you need to be careful not only about your use of electronic media, but also you choice of them. While this Note provides advice for each component of electronic and voice mail messages, consistent advice on the choice of media does not exist.

Summarizing her own informal experiment, one author wrote, "Ask 10 executives: Is it most correct to e-mail, voice mail or fax her the information [given a specific situation] ... No two answers [are] the same" (Pachter 1996).

In addition to your own purpose and ease of use, the audience's preferences, and the context, your choices about media use should consider include at least the following three issues:

1. **Urgency** — If your message is urgent, voice mail is probably the best approach, but it depends on your recipient's communication patterns and preferences. Using a *combination* of media (e.g., e-mail followed by voice mail) may also be a useful way to handle an urgent matter.

2. **Complexity** — If your message is detailed and includes more than a handful of fact and figures, consider using e-mail or a fax.

3. **"Forwardability"** — If your recipient may want to forward your message, e-mail may be the best bet.[1]

Additional considerations will also be appropriate based on the situation, the maturity of the media, the experience of the individuals using those media, etc. By not taking such issues into consideration, people can make improper media choices. For example, they may use e-mail so extensively and substitute it for personal contact that they harm customer service or jeopardize personal relationships.

Voice mail is similar to e-mail in that it is easy to go too far with your messages. In general, most people recommend avoiding e-mail and voice mail for sensitive, performance-related information and for delivering bad news. It is easy for recipients to over- (or under-) interpret both e-mail and voice mail messages. Be aware that the words in your brief update can assume a life of their own — well beyond your intended meaning.

Privacy

A 1993 survey indicated that 41 percent of employers electronically eavesdrop on employees (Angell, 1994). A more recent report indicates that 45 percent of major corporations monitor their employees' e-mail, v-mail, computer files, or phone calls. Including video cameras in corporate offices increases the percentage of companies involved in employee surveillance to 67 percent (Diederich 1999). As recent court cases have shown, e-mail is also subject to subpoena — whether it is kept on a work or home computer (Lewis 1998, Harmon 1998).

Thus, it is important to remember that e-mail is not completely confidential. Your employer may be reading it and some people have assistants read or sort their e-mail. In addition, most e-mail systems back up messages (even un-sent ones) for months or years. Truly deleting an e-mail message is quite difficult. E-mail is relatively permanent and your message may reach more people than you originally intend it to. There is generally no such thing as private e-mail; think of it like a postcard — no one is supposed to read them, but you wouldn't use one to send the

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[1] Most voice mail systems include a forwarding feature, but it generally only works *within* the system, not with outside users.

company's (or your own) secrets. Encryption does help and many companies use it to secure private company information, but it can also be overused.

Corporate and Work Group E-Mail Issues

Establishing clear policies regarding e-mail is increasingly important for companies in general. As the Microsoft anti-trust, Iran-Contra, and various discrimination cases all attest, there are significant and quite consequential legal implications of the use, retention, and disposal of e-mail (e.g., see Harmon 1998, Lohr 1998). Corporate e-mail policies typically:

- Emphasize that computer and e-mail systems belong to the company and should be used only for business purposes;

- Establish management's right to monitor e-mail to ensure proper use;

- Ensure that employees understand that they should be careful when addressing e-mail and drafting messages;

- State clearly the limits of your system for storing old e-mails and encourage employees to clean-up their e-mail boxes on a regular basis; and

- Remind employees that hard and "soft" copies of e-mail are subject to subpoena and legal discovery requests.

Advisors on this topic also encourage companies to 1) remind people of the policy periodically (e.g., on boot up or login); 2) have employees sign and date copies of the policy, and 3) implement a document retention policy whereby people are asked to periodically erase e-mail files and make hard copies of important documents (Opel 1999).

While several widely publicized court cases indicate the importance of company-wide policies and procedures regarding e-mail, developing clear norms (and sometimes a written policy) for individual business units, offices, and work groups can be just as important. As individual managers, you may be in the position to guide the establishment of such norms and policies and should be cognizant of their signaling effect. In particular, the following e-mail norms seem to send especially important signals about a work group's culture and expectations:

- How often are people expected to check and respond to e-mail?

- Who is expected to use e-mail?

- Who is expected to be CC'd and BCC'd on what type(s) of messages?

- Do individuals use e-mail themselves or do they use assistants as "filterers?"

The answers to these questions can send important signals about your own style as a leader/manager and about the work group, office, business unit, or company culture that you support. In addition to setting clear policies and norms regarding use of e-mail within a group, it can also be important to establish clear norms regarding the use of e-mail in interactions with customers.

Netiquette

In their book on e-mail style, Angell and Heslop (1998) note that "Developing an e-mail writing style that is effective and timely requires an e-mail-centric approach to writing." They continue, "E-mail is not merely the bastard child of the print medium; it has its own needs and conventions, its own strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, many questions of style, long ago settled for print media and fixed into rules of style manuals, need to be reexamined in light of the new e-mail medium." Indeed, many of the classic elements of good communication are highly relevant to e-mail, but new "codes of conduct" are also emerging to respond to the new capabilities — and pitfalls — of the medium. Just as with voice mail and video-conferencing, "Many of the conventional etiquette rules used in any business environment continue to be acceptable, but new rules of 'netiquette' have emerged to cater to these new media" (Selway 1999). In that spirit, this section addresses the emerging norms for personal use of e-mail. Also, see the reading on "Tracking the Evolution of E-Mail Etiquette" (Hafner 1998).

While e-mail is written, it shares many of the characteristics of oral speech. However, it also has important differences and some paradoxes. Unlike oral speech, e-mail is easily archived and searched. Conversely, it is easily deleted (albeit not always permanently erased, as Oliver North learned the hard way). Unlike the norms regarding inter-office memos, cover letters, telephone calls, and other more established media or genres, clear norms regarding e-mail use are still emerging. Even in organizations where e-mail norms are fairly firmly established, they are still primarily local — i.e., those norms do not apply outside the organization.

As a result, one netiquette maven (Shea 1995) noted that "The only 'golden rule' of netiquette is to behave. That is the only overriding rule of all etiquette, which by its very nature is composed of specific rules for specific situations." In many cases, e-mail norms established at the local level (i.e., by an individual business unit or office) are much more important than any norms at the industry or business level anyway.

Nonetheless, some norms are clearer than others and — especially in this fluid environment — some advice and cautions are worth noting. Such advice is presented in the following pages and concerns several aspects of e-mail communication: addresses, salutations and closing, subject lines, message content, formatting, replies and forwards, message editing, attachments, and general use.

Addresses
- Proofread your address fields especially carefully to avoid embarrassing and/or career-limiting mis-sends. Be especially cautious when using the Reply command so that you avoid replying to a listserv or using "Reply to All" when you only intended only to "Reply to Sender."

- Use carbon copies (CCs) and blind carbon copies (BCCs) sparingly; some organizations now expressly forbid them. In particular, avoid CCing or BCCing someone's superior in an attempt to pressure the person to act or to complain about the person's conduct.

- Alphabetize multiple recipients' addresses to avoid sending unintentional messages about hierarchy or the importance of certain recipients.

➢ Resist the temptation and keep your recipient list to a minimum. To cover themselves, people tend to include more people in distribution lists than are really necessary, but cluttering your boss's or colleagues' in-boxes with numerous CCs can quickly turn them off and reduce the likelihood that your important messages will be read.

➢ Manage your distribution lists carefully, considering the logic of them (e.g., geographic, functional, or hierarchical), how you will use them, and how you will update them.

➢ Keep your use of "receipt requested" to a minimum; it often signals distrust.

➢ Remember that just because someone has an e-mail address doesn't mean they check their e-mail; as much as possible, know your recipients' preferences and foibles.

➢ Send a message to yourself and use BCC for the distribution list if you want recipients to see only their own names

Subjects

➢ Use precise, meaningful subject lines to emphasize your topic, and (some say) limit each message to one subject (so that it can be responded to and forwarded more easily).

➢ Be sure to put the most important words near the beginning, as many e-mail systems won't display the full subject line in their "summary" view. This is helpful for both your recipient and your own e-mail filing system.

➢ Re-write subject lines of replies as the subject changes; don't just leave it unchanged from reply to reply.

➢ Consider using common acronyms or abbreviations (e.g., FYI) at the beginning of subjects to help your recipients' sort through their inboxes.

Salutations and Closings

➢ Use personal salutations and closings whenever possible. Undirected e-mail can leave a recipient wondering why s/he received it, or miffed at the impersonality.

Message Content

➢ Keep sentences short and messages brief (one screen or 25 lines is a standard used by some). Given the conversational nature of much e-mail, it's easy to ramble and write overly long and unstructured messages.

➢ Remember that the many of the structural elements of a normal business memo or letter are just as useful in e-mail. As with good paper-based business correspondence, e-mails should have a clear purpose, clarify why the person is getting the message, and be specific about any expected action.

➢ Be clear about when and whether you expect/need a reply. In fact, consider using simple templates at the beginning of your messages. Such templates might include:

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Purpose: _____
Action Requested: _____
Attachment: _____
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- Use humor sparingly (or not at all with strangers); it can jazz up your delivery, but can also easily offend (if not your recipient, unintended recipients) and also tends not to translate well across cultures.

- Never send an e-mail in the heat of anger or frustration. Such messages often lead to consequences (e.g., flame wars) that you'll later regret.

- Don't use e-mail to gossip or criticize others and avoid racially or otherwise offensive language (i.e., "flaming"). This may seem obvious to some, but R.R. Donnelly & Sons, Morgan Stanley (a $60m suit), and others have found themselves in court over racially offensive e-mails exchanged between co-workers (Cole-Gomolski 1998).

- Provide full contact information in the footer of most business e-mails and consider creating a formal e-mail "letterhead."

- Know your audience and, as with other communication genres, make decisions about emoticons, abbreviations, and other informalities accordingly. Some consider emoticons welcome additions that personalize correspondence. Others find them "just plain silly" for business communications.

- Be careful about your tone and make sure that it's appropriate for your intended audience (as well as potentially unintended audiences to whom your message might be forwarded). For some, it may be fine to be quite conversational with messages that read more like Post-It notes or postcards instead of formal memos. For others, you should treat e-mail just as you would a traditional business memo or letter.

- Be especially attentive to your tone and content in messages addressed to those outside your office (especially clients or potential clients), to those in different countries or national cultures, and to those who speak a different language.

- Don't assume that everyone is familiar with your emoticons or e-mail abbreviations; they're flourishing, but aren't universally recognized [e.g., variations on the basic :-(or :-) or abbreviations such as IMHO and BTW].

- Be sensitive to conversion issues (time zone, dates, weights, etc.) in international e-mails. For example, dates are generally written MM/DD/YY in the U.S., but DD/MM/YY in Europe and YY/MM/DD in Asia. The 24-hour "military" clock is also widely outside of U.S. for non-military purposes.

Replies and Forwards
- Don't send replies that depend on the memory of the original sender. A reply of "Yes" can be quite cryptic without the original question.

- Be aware of local norms and individual preferences for including original messages in your reply. Some people advise only including the beginning (as a reference) or only include those parts that are relevant to your reply. In such cases, be clear what's part of the original and what's part of your reply by setting them off as separate paragraphs and/or using preceding characters like >>>'s. In some communities, the norm of keeping an entire message at the end of your message has developed, allowing a whole conversational thread to be preserved.

- Ask for permission before forwarding, inserting, or posting someone else's message.

➤ Be careful when you receive a message as a BCC; you shouldn't reply or act in a way to compromise the "blindness" of the original message.

➤ Never forward or create chain-letter e-mail, and consider any that you receive with a strong dose of skepticism. As an article on the "Internet's Chain of Foolery" (Kelley 1999b) noted, "Bill Gates is not going to send you to Disneyland ... and no one is going to close the Internet down for a day of spring cleaning."

➤ Use the auto-reply feature when you will be away from your e-mail for an extended period of time. Not all systems have such features, but those that do send out automatic replies indicating the "_____ has received your message but will be out the office until ____."

Attachments

➤ Avoid large attachments unless you know your recipient can receive them easily or is prepared for a slow transfer. Paste text into messages or use hyperlinks rather than attachments when possible.

➤ Be aware that large attachments can bog down some systems and will be zipped by others (e.g., AOL).

➤ Use Winzip or other programs to compact large attachments if you know your recipient can decompress the file

➤ Include your e-mail address within all attached files.

➤ Specify the type and version of the software used to create attachments.

➤ Double check that you actually did attach a file/s (or get in the habit of attaching as you go, rather than postponing it until you're finished with the message).

➤ Ensure that your computer is virus-free, especially if you send attachments frequently.

➤ Run anti-virus software on any attachments with .COM, .EXE, or .BAT extensions. This is especially important given the periodic outbreaks of computer viruses transmitted via e-mail (Markhoff 1999; Richtel 1999).

➤ Delete any strange attachments (whether from known or unknown senders — some viruses attach themselves to messages, unbeknownst to the senders).

Formatting

➤ Use the structural elements a normal business letter (e.g., headings, sub-headings, lists, embedded lists, and bullets) to make your message easier to follow.

➤ Avoid ALL CAPS ("shouting") and all lowercase ("whispering"). One is associated with flaming and both are difficult to read.

➤ Avoid the formatting limitations of some recipients' e-mail systems by using ASCII characters to format text. For example, use:

- Asterisks to bracket words you would italicize in print;

- All capital letters for text that you might otherwise boldface (but do so sparingly, as ALL CAPS also signify shouting or flaming);

- Underscore marks to bracket text that you might otherwise underline (although underlining is becoming increasingly rare in documents because modern word processors make italicizing possible instead); and,

- Number (#), asterisk (*), plus (+), or hyphen (-) symbols where you would otherwise use bullets.

➤ Use a standard, cross-platform format (e.g., "rich text format" — RTF) or "back save" to an early, widely convertible version (e.g., Excel or Lotus v.1.0) if you're sending an attached file to individuals who may have different software.

Editing

➤ Edit messages to create short, focused paragraphs.

➤ Even though e-mail tends to be a more relaxed medium, use proper grammar and spelling

➤ Structure your message to make a good "1st screen" impression. If not, your readers may hit Delete before they hit the PageDown.

➤ Phrase messages so that they can be replied to easily and ask for a reply at the beginning (or even in subject line) if you want one.

➤ Proofread every outgoing message. Reading aloud often helps, especially when you are reading from the screen.

➤ Use one of several tests to gauge your e-mail's appropriateness (e.g., would you want your mother, boss, or customer to read it, would you want it printed in the newspaper or the company newsletter, etc.)

➤ Avoid flaming by waiting and calming down before replying to an offensive message, asking yourself whether you'd say what you've just written to the person's face, re-reading all messages before sending them, using "[Flame On]" and "[Flame Off]" to bracket intentionally heated text or to alert your reader that you're just venting.

➤ Be careful that you're not too blunt. It's easier to be too direct in e-mail because of the impersonal nature of the medium, which sometimes reduces inhibitions.

Information Management

➤ Categorize/prioritize messages by date, subject, and/or sender and selectively (and very cautiously) use these categories to delete junk mail without reading it.

➤ Create filters to transfer certain messages to specified e-mail boxes — for example create mailboxes for listserv messages that never require an immediate reply, leaving your main "In-Box" for other more pressing messages.

➤ Unsubscribe yourself from listservs and other services whose e-mail you rarely read.

➤ Answer your messages (at least tentatively) as you read them; if a message requires an extended reply, send a brief initial message indicating when you will be able to reply in full.

➤ Avoid writing yourself reminders about e-mails that need a reply — it is self-defeating.

➤ Don't print your e-mails unless you are going to read them during a time when you will not have access to your computer. This wastes time and also defeats the purpose of medium.

➢ Check e-mail at least once a day, but set a specific time (or times) when you handle e-mail. Unless you are expecting an important message, reading individual messages as they arrive is akin to having a new colleague stop by your office to chat every half hour. Just as you might forward your calls to voice mail or an assistant and deal with your messages en masse at a later time, don't interrupt your work every time you get an e-mail.

➢ Turn off the "bell" or other reminder accompanying new messages in some systems; it will help reduce your e-mail interruptions.

➢ Establish a separate account for personal and professional mail — this can help categorize mail and can also be useful from a privacy standpoint.

General Use

➢ Know when it's appropriate to use e-mail in your organization

➢ Make arrangements for handling your e-mail if you are planning to be gone and "offline" for an extended period of time

➢ Know what your organization's (or clients') norms are regarding how frequently to check and respond to e-mails.

➢ If you don't have time for a full reply, at least acknowledge receipt of the message and set the sender's expectations about a reply.

➢ Don't send repeat messages if you don't get a reply; try a different medium to see if your message got through.

➢ Know your recipients if you use e-mail for time-sensitive messages (e.g., canceling or moving a meeting on short notice) and be careful about assuming that they'll check their mail in time.

Use all these tips with caution as norms vary from one community of e-mail users to another.

VOICE MAIL

Like e-mail, voice mail (v-mail) has spread like wildfire in corporate life. By 1994, it had been installed by 80 percent of Fortune 500s (Leslie 1994). By the Year 2000, its presence will be a forgone conclusion for all but a few organizations.

For many, voice mail has become a helpful way to manage their time. This it true for both those who rely on it to "screen" calls and those who use it to leave messages and avoid extended conversations. Used selectively, both can be helpful; taken to the extreme, they can also strain relationships — with colleagues, clients, or customers.

As v-mail has gone portable through cell phones and pagers, it has enabled an even wider variety of uses and benefits. As new technologies are developed and new, creative uses for existing voice messaging technologies emerge, the norms for voice mail's use will also continue to evolve. While the norms regarding v-mail use still vary considerably by organization, heavy users and vendors do agree on some basic guidelines. Below, we provide a compilation of such advice for Greetings, Messages, and Return Calls.[2]

Greetings

Extensive research on first impressions indicates that acquaintances make important and lasting judgments in the first 15 seconds of an interaction. When it comes to voice-mail, you can't "dress for success," but you can create and effective greeting or "outgoing message" (OGM). The following are some tips to improve yours.

➢ Keep it simple and businesslike. Cute and/or musical messages are fine for your personal answering machine, but not for your office. Depending on who's calling, that message may make a very important first impression.

➢ Alternatively, there are those who include quotes, observations, or humor on their greetings. Opting for a lighter, more casual approach, they believe it "loosens up callers." The choice between simple/businesslike or casual/catchy is a clear example of how norms for electronic communications are situation-specific.

➢ Say how frequently you check your messages or make it clear when you'll be able to return calls if you're not in the office.

➢ Use a friendly tone. As with other verbal communications, tone often sends a stronger message than content.

➢ Keep your greeting current. If your greeting includes time-sensitive information (e.g., whether you're in the office today or on vacation for a week), be sure to update your greeting regularly. In some settings (especially sales), updating your greeting on a daily basis (e.g., "Hello, today is Monday, September 1st, and I am ...") is encouraged as a way to let callers know that you check your messages regularly.

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[2] These guidelines are focused on individual v-mail use. Guidelines for tele-conferencing and interactive voice response systems are beyond the scope of this Note.

- Give callers an "out" by inviting them to press zero (or your system's associated "escape code" number) to reach a live person (be it your assistant or a receptionist).

- Let callers know whether you can be paged (in or out of the office).

- Tell callers what information you'd like in their messages. For example, if your v-mail system doesn't date- and time-stamp messages, ask callers to note the time and date of their call.

- Avoid "phone tag" by asking callers for the best time to return their call.

- Let repeat callers know how they can skip to the end of your greeting. In many voice mail systems, this can be done by pressing the * or # key.

- Turn "Transfer All Calls" or similar features off if you are going to be away from your phone for an extended period of time. Don't make callers wait through several rings before your voice-mail picks up.

- End your greeting with the "*" key rather than simply hanging up the phone, so that a loud hang-up doesn't become part of your greeting.

- Avoid unnecessary instructions. In this regard, Chicago Tribune columnist Eric Zorn makes two points:

  - There is no need to remind callers that the beep indicates it is their turn to talk. Anyone who doesn't know that by now is probably someone you don't want to hear from.

  - "I can't come to the phone right now" or "I'm on my phone or away from my desk" is implicit in any [outgoing message]. Only if there is a reason that will delay your receipt of the incoming message by more than a day — vacation, business travel, medical matters — should you bother explaining. (Zorn 1999)

- Don't drag out the end of your message with phrases like "If you have any questions, call me"; they are generally unnecessary and needlessly lengthen your greeting.

Messages

A national survey by Pacific Bell indicates that the top three irritants in voice mail are 1) messages containing too much information, 2) messages that omit vital information like a caller's name or phone number, and 3) callers who speak too slowly and repeat everything twice (Zimmerman 1998). Addressing these and other "peaves" will improve your electronic communications.

- Anticipate that you may get voice-mail rather than the person you're calling. Before making any call, take 10-15 seconds to figure out what you're going to say and what you need to cover in the call. This way, if you don't reach the person and need to leave a message, you already have the message planned out. Planning your message helps avoid rambling messages that leave recipients wondering about your focus and questioning why you really called.

- Identify who you are and whom you're calling right up front. In this way, the recipient can quickly identify a mis-sent message or people sharing a mail box can "triage" incoming messages.

➢ Be helpful and re-direct mis-sent messages to the best of your ability. "Do unto others ..."

➢ Except for your phone number and name, avoid repeating yourself. If you speak clearly, repetition is generally unnecessary — and often irksome to people listening to a box full of messages.

➢ Be clear and concise, thinking of your messages as summary memos.

➢ State the reason for your call (the voice mail equivalent of a subject line in e-mail or a memo) and what sort of response you need.

➢ Limit messages to one subject so that recipients can forward them without including inappropriate information.

➢ Speak naturally and (depending on the nature of your message) smile. According to AmeriTel, Inc., smiling has a profoundly positive impact on the tone of your message. And, given that vocal tones account for 84 percent of your impact on the telephone (Master 1998), you should be quite conscious of *how* you sound.

➢ Leave a complete message. Voice mail can be a great way to avoid phone-tag, but not if your messages stop at "Hi, it's John. Please call me back."

➢ Use broadcast messages judiciously. First, as the number of messages people receive increases, it becomes more important to target your messages carefully and not flood people's boxes with questionably relevant information. Second, as with e-mail, it is easy to make embarrassing or career-limiting mis-sends.

➢ Delete messages frequently (but carefully); as with e-mail, avoid the urge to save messages that still require your attention.

Just as in e-mail, you can send (intentionally and unintentionally) many subtle messages with voice mail. For example, you should consider the implicit signals you send you colleagues and staff when you leave voice mail messages at off hours — in after-midnight or pre-dawn hours and on the weekends. If you — as a boss — are checking and sending e-mails on Sunday afternoon, you are sending your staff a message that Sundays are also work days. In certain situations and at certain times, you may choose to send such a message — but at least do so consciously.

Return Calls

An estimated 70 percent of calls do not reach the intended party on the first try (Anderson 1997). As a result, voice mail and the return are critical. Return your messages promptly, lest callers wonder whether you got their message. Even if you don't have a complete response, call them back or reply to the v-mail message to let them know you're working on it.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize several overarching points. First, e-mail and v-mail are relatively new media, but the Golden Rule, rules of commonsense, and professional ethics still apply. In fact, the growth of new media which have a very limited capacity for non-verbal cues has actually heightened the importance of some of these old codes of conduct. Second, when in doubt, use what Sloan calls the "boss rule" in its e-mail policy. If you wouldn't want your boss to hear or see it, you should probably not put it in a voice- or e-mail message. Third, most of the codes of conduct regarding these two new media are still quite local, norms regarding their use are still emerging, and the range of uses for them is still to be defined. Given this "in flux" environment, caution and commonsense will take you a long way.

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