Email Etiquette –
How to Get a Reply, and Create a Professional Image

Jeff Short - Professor, Business Management
Jeff.short@humber.ca

As with all forms of human interaction, when you send an e-mail there are established rules and expectations (i.e. etiquette) that will help you to communicate more effectively. In addition, following these simple rules will help you to show respect and establish your reputation as a professional.

@ Include a Subject: The "Subject" must briefly and clearly indicate what your e-mail is about. Busy managers often receive hundreds of e-mails every day so it is impossible to read them all. Managers therefore use the "Subject" to prioritize which messages to open first, and which to ignore completely. An e-mail with a clear and relevant subject is likely to be read first; while a vague, unprofessional, or "blank" subject is more likely to be ignored and immediately deleted.

@ Do Not "Recycle" Old E-mails: Always create a new e-mail with it's own subject. Replying to an old e-mail that contains unrelated details causes confusion, and gives the reader the impression that you are lazy and lack respect for their time.

If a live e-mail exchange happens to evolve into a new topic, it may be helpful to change the "Subject" to a description that better matches the new theme. That said, if the "back-and-forth" of the e-mail exchange is starting to resemble a "conversation", that could be your hint that a telephone call or an actual in-person meeting may be a more helpful medium to communicate.

@ E-mail is More Formal than Texting: Texting is extremely informal, and uses many abbreviations designed to save time such as: K = Ok, U = You, RU = Are you?, 404 = I don't know, and COS = Because. In comparison, a business e-mail is more formal and resembles a written memo. The organization of an e-mail must utilize the proper spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure necessary to support clear and professional communication. Check spelling, organize your thoughts clearly, and do not use abbreviations! Poor writing not only makes it difficult to understand what you are saying, it will give the recipient the impression that you are unprofessional and couldn't be bothered to take the time to be clear. If you don't take the time to make your message clear, why would you expect the recipient to spend their time replying?

@ Be Polite: It is important to start your e-mail with a traditional greeting such as "Dear _____", "Hello", or even a simple "Hi". Likewise, politeness requires a proper sign-off at the conclusion of an e-mail such as, "Regards", "Respectfully", or "Thank You". E-mails that ignore these social practices are often perceived as demanding and aggressive, and this is not a helpful way to develop any relationship. Related to the formality of the opening salutation, most managers in Canada are ok with being addressed by their first name; however it is advisable to initiate early contact in a more formal manner by including titles such as "Mr., Ms., Dr., or Professor" until they invite you use their first name.

@ To..., Cc…, Bcc…, are Useful but Potentially Dangerous:
The purpose of the "To" field is obvious; it should include the recipients to whom you are sending your e-mail to directly. The assumption therefore is that the e-mail is relevant to them and you are likely requesting a reply. When multiple recipients are identified in the "To" field, it is unclear whom the e-mail is specifically directed to. In addition, the e-mail address and names of all recipients are visible for all to see. Some recipients may view this as a violation of their privacy.

The "Cc" (Carbon Copy) field is intended to include recipients you believe should be aware of the details of your e-mail, but it is not necessary that they do anything. Examples of helpful use of "Cc" might include sharing information with team members, or providing documentation that actions have been taken on an issue. The details of all recipients in the "Cc" field are visible to all other recipients, so privacy may be a concern.

Finally, the "Bcc" (Blind Carbon Copy) field is similar to "Cc" except that the identities of recipients in the Bcc field are hidden from all other recipients receiving the e-mail. This is often very useful to protect the privacy of recipients when broadcasting a generic e-mail to a large number of people as an announcement. Bcc is used when information is being shared but the identity of these recipients is best kept private from other recipients.

@ **Be Careful with "Reply to All":** Reply to All is literally a reply to every-single-other-person who received the original e-mail either as a "To" or "Cc". Suppose the original sender wanted to collect feedback about a potential meeting date from ten team members. If each member replies to all just once, each team member will receive 100 e-mails on this topic. Besides unnecessarily increasing everyone's e-mail volume, "replying to all" gets annoying fast. Unless everyone needs to hear your reply, just select "Reply", and restrict your response to the original sender only. This shows respect for your colleague's time.

@ **Your Signature and Contact Information:** At a minimum, your signature must include your full name. Additional details that would likely be helpful to identify you are also ideal and typically include your organization's name, department, website, and phone number. If you are part of a large organization it is often helpful to include other information prominently in the e-mail that is necessary to identify you. For example, if you are a student at a large college, providing your student number below your full name, or clearly in the body or subject of your e-mail would certainly help your professor or administrator to answer your questions much more quickly.

@ **Response Time:** An acceptable response time for e-mail is typically 24 to 48 hours. Do not send multiple back-to-back e-mails on the same subject within 48 hours. If you do not allow the recipient sufficient time to reply, your multiple enquiries will likely annoy the recipient and be interpreted as demanding and disrespectful of the recipient's other obligations. Be courteous and allow the recipient enough time to reply. If you have not received a reply after two business days and you have been following all the e-mail etiquette rules described above, a polite follow-up to your original e-mail would be appropriate. By the way, other people assume that you are checking your e-mail frequently too, so they also expect that you will reply to them promptly.

In a competitive and fast-paced world, first impressions are more important than ever. If the first impression you make is through an e-mail, make sure it's a positive one. By following these simple rules to e-mail, you will be seen as a professional who communicates clearly, manages their time well, and demonstrates respect for others. Many attributes are made about you based on a short e-mail; this is why it is so important to thoughtfully manage your communications. ❖