UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
Facilities Directorate

Guidance for the Use of E-Mail

Why we need guidance on email use
Unclear, mistimed or inappropriate messages can cause frustration and unintentionally damage working relationships. In extreme cases a message could put the sender in breach of University policies and codes on use of IT systems, data protection, security, or bullying and harassment (links follow below). Emails can, and have, been the basis or part of grievances and disciplinary cases. Emails – however old – can also be disclosed under a request for information and can be summoned as evidence in a tribunal or court case. For example a member of staff might request to see all emails mentioning their name.

Guidance on sending emails
Ask whether email is the best way of communicating this
Before writing an email consider if the message is best communicated via email – if it’s on a difficult or sensitive topic, might it be better discussed over the phone or face to face?

Times to avoid using email:
- When you feel strongly about an issue
- When you are asking someone to do a large or complicated piece of work, email might be used to follow-up a conversation

Get the content right – composing the email
Put yourself in the position of someone receiving the email and think through these three questions before sending a message:
What do they need to know or do as a result of the message?
- How are they likely to respond to the message, its tone, timing, who else is copied in to it and content?
- Is the content something you would say in conversation and be comfortable sharing with others, eg if the message is about another colleague not copied in would you be comfortable if that person did see the message?

For example, what may be intended as a short, factual message sent from a group leader from home late at night and copied into other colleagues could be received as an abrupt and rude directive which can lead colleagues to feel pressure to be available at all hours.

Since reading from a screen is more difficult than reading from paper, the structure and lay out is very important for e-mail messages. Use short paragraphs and blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number them or mark each point as separate to keep the overview.

Try not to send any email text in capitals IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITALS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING. This can be highly annoying and might trigger an unwanted response.

Try not to use abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud). The recipient might not be aware of the meanings of the abbreviations and in business emails these are generally not appropriate. The same goes for emoticons, such as the smiley :-). If you are not sure whether your recipient knows what it means, it is better not to use it.

Remember that when you use formatting in your emails, the sender might not be able to view formatting, or might see different fonts than you had intended. When using colours, use a colour that is easy to read on the background.
Try to use the active voice of a verb wherever possible. For instance, 'We will repair your boiler today', sounds better than 'Your boiler will be repaired today'. The first sounds more personal, whereas the latter, especially when used frequently, can sound unnecessarily formal.

Try to keep your sentences to a maximum of 15-20 words. Email is meant to be a quick medium and requires a different kind of writing from letters. Also take care not to send emails that are too long. If a person receives an email that looks like a dissertation, chances are that they will not even attempt to read it!

**Copying messages to others (using the Cc field) and replying to email**

The copying in of others not directly related can be perceived to mean those others have agreed the message or that the receiver is under pressure from those copied in.

When you reply to an email, include the original mail in your reply, in other words click 'Reply', instead of 'New Mail'. Leaving the thread might take a fraction longer in download time, but it can save the recipient time and frustration in looking for related emails in their inbox!

Only use Reply to All if you really need your message to be seen by each person who received the original message.

**Dos and Don'ts**

**Do:**
- Think through the purpose of the message, and about how it will be received
- Use meaningful wording in the Subject line
- Write clearly and concisely – state near the top of the email if it is intended for action or just information
- Send to those who need to receive it and cc’d only to those who need to be aware the message has been sent
- Use the subject line to help your reader, eg “For comment – draft bid for funding”
- Use proper spelling, punctuation and grammar
- Think about the appropriate tone and style for the intended audience. Sarcasm and jokes in emails can easily be taken the wrong way.
- Read the email before you send it
- Consider the timing of any requests, how long people need to respond and how the receiver might perceive the timing

**Don't:**
- send any unprotected or confidential information
- use the cc field to get the receiver in trouble or imply endorsement of those cc'd
- overuse the ‘High priority’ option
- use URGENT and IMPORTANT
- use email for a prolonged discussion or to get several people to reach consensus on an issue
- attach unnecessary files

**If you receive an email which is inappropriate or offensive**

If you receive a message from a member of the University which you find inappropriate or offensive, resist the temptation to just reply which can make a difficult situation worse. Think through why and how the sender may have put the message in that form (they may by nature be quite direct and that affects the way they write emails). Try speaking to them, over the phone or face to face. If you feel you cannot do this, raise the matter with your line manager and ask for advice or with your local HR contact.

Be careful forwarding on jokes and pictures, whilst you may not find them offensive others might.

Spam and phishing emails should be reported as advised by ISS, see www.leeds.ac.uk/iss
Alternatives to email

Reaching large groups of staff
If the message is for information, e.g., an event, then add this to online listings or to an existing newsletter. The Facilities Directorate has a newsletter, FD Matters, which we use to keep colleagues updated on news items, changes to processes, new appointments, and other developments. These reduce the number of emails being sent and received. Items for inclusion should be sent to Eloise Owram, Office Support Team, Estates Building, Email e.owram@leeds.ac.uk Tel: 0113 3430216.

Sharing documents
Sending large files - e.g., brochures - can slow people's inboxes, be difficult for people working off site to pick up and create problems with version control. If the document is finalised consider sharing it via the website, if it is work in progress talk to your local IT manager about collaborative working systems.

Handling a difficult subject
Giving difficult feedback to a colleague or covering a sensitive subject can be hard by email and finding time to speak – by phone or to meet can give both parties a chance to set an appropriate tone for the discussion, understand how the message is being received and clarify points relatively quickly. Email can be used to confirm the points discussed and actions following a meeting.

Personal emails
The University provides email for work and research purposes. We allow personal use long as it does not interfere with your work. Suspected computer crime and misuse of email will be investigated in accordance with our security incident & computer misuse policy (see http://campus.leeds.ac.uk/isms/policies/incident/index.htm).

More information and guidance on email and other means of communications are available through SDDU or contact the University's communications team on 0113 343 4100, or email webcomms@leeds.ac.uk.

See also:
ISS rules and regulations, iss.leeds.ac.uk/info/259/it_security/120/rules_and_regulations/5
Human Resources policies, www.hr.leeds.ac.uk/policies
Data protection, campus.leeds.ac.uk/dpa/
Freedom of Information, campus.leeds.ac.uk/foi/
ISS policy on bulk email, http://campus.leeds.ac.uk/isms/policies/use/internet_4.htm

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