

Effective Use of E-mail

Below are some hints and tips that we have found highly effective in helping to make better use of e-mail...

1. Consider Not Using It!

This might sound like treason but it should always be your first consideration.

E-mail is a wonderful invention but it often fails to convey the emotion in a message and the subtle nuances that distinguish a joke from a serious comment, for example.

E-mail is cold and stark in comparison to the spoken word, so wherever you can use the phone or go to speak with the other person. This latter option not only gets the blood circulating but it also promotes genuine social networking in the office!

2. Use the Subject Line

What is your reaction to the following examples of subject lines?

Subject : [Blank]

Subject : [This is important/urgent]

Subject : [A simple/quick question for you]

If you are like me you will probably treat them with low importance, (often the reverse of what was intended).

The subject line is the 'hook' - it's the first thing that people scan in their inbox and is crucial to gaining their attention.

Leaving it blank infers that you cannot be bothered to fill it in and that your name, in itself, will be enough to gain attention. An arrogant approach!

Telling someone it's important or urgent is not much better. Important or urgent for who? For them maybe, but is it for you? An assumptive approach!

If it's simple or quick then why are they asking you? It sounds like it's going to be anything but simple or quick! A subtle form of delegation perhaps?

Hot Tip - the subject line should clearly indicate the reason why the recipient is required to respond or take action.

How about this then?

Subject : [Meeting]

Not much better than the above examples, but it might just gain my attention.

Subject : [Meeting Next Friday]

A little better. I can now check my diary to see if I'm actually free on that day.

Subject : [Meeting 14:00 Next Friday]

Getting there...

Subject : [Meeting 14:00 Next Friday to Allocate Annual Budgets]

I'm definitely interested now!

Subject : [Meeting 14:00 Next Friday to Allocate Annual Budgets Cancelled!]

Perhaps not – just one extra word has changed the whole thing round.

Or alternatively...

Subject : [Can You Attend Meeting 14:00 Next Friday to Allocate Annual Budgets?]

OK it's rather long, (and no doubt you can think of ways of improving it further), but it contains all the key elements to raise my interest and allow me to make a decision.

NB : when replying it's a good idea to change the subject line so it reflects what you're saying in the reply.

For example...

Subject : [Attendance Confirmed at Budget Meeting Next Friday]

Here's a few more examples of how you could use the subject line to good effect.

Subject : [Here are the Details of Outlook Training 24th March]

Subject : [Can I Book the Conference Room am 24th March?]

Subject : [Did You Receive the Budget Drafts I Sent via the Post?]

Subject : [Please Confirm Costs of Room Hire for 24th March]

Subject : [12 People Attending Feedback Session – Need a Bigger Room]

3. Keep Focused & Proof Read

I'm sure you will have sent e-mails that pose several questions and the recipient has simply responded to the first one? Other times they may respond to all of the questions except the last one – very frustrating!

So always aim to keep it simple and to the point.

If you have a number of points, that are not related, then why not use several e-mails?

If they are related, increase their impact and readability by numbering each one, (it looks a bit officious but tends to gain the readers attention).

NB : many organisations use only plain text for their e-mails so stick to numbered lists and avoid using bullet points (and other fancy formatting), unless you know the recipient can handle formatted text, (or use * and – to make your own bullet lists).

Always re-read your e-mails before you send them and weed out any unnecessary padding and waffle. Long meandering e-mails take a long time to write, a long time to read, put extra strain on your server and eat up disk space!

If an e-mail is proving difficult to compose correctly (or if you get interrupted part way through writing it) use the save feature (Ctrl + S in Outlook) to put a copy in the 'Drafts' folder. You can then return to it later and carry on writing.

If you do this it's also a very good idea NOT to specify a recipient until the end - in case you accidentally hit the 'Send' key prematurely, (something I have direct, and painful, experience of so I always add the recipient LAST!)

4. Get a Grip on Attachments

It's very easy to send huge file attachments through the system without thinking about the effect this has on storage and performance.

The first thing to consider is 'do I need to send the whole thing?' If not simply copy and paste the relevant extract into the e-mail body. That way it keeps everything neatly together and maintains focus.

NB : including content in the main body also means that recipients who don't have the software used to create the original file can still view it. The same applies to users of portable devices without the facility to open attachments.

If you have to attach a file always check its size first and consider 'zipping' anything that's over say 1MB.

If the attached file contains graphics then these can usually be compressed in the office application used to create them, (e.g. via the Picture toolbar in MS-Office).

Once you receive an attachment it makes sense to copy it to your hard disk and then remove the original from the e-mail, (in Outlook open the e-mail and Right Click on the attachment to do this).

For really large files consider placing them in 'Public Folders' (in Outlook) or shared network drives which all users can access. The main e-mail then need only contain a 'pointer' showing where to find the file, (e.g. use a title like 'Please see file located in folder xxxx').

5. Don't Let it Control You

E-mail works much faster than any human brain and never tires. If we are not careful it can take over our working lives and become the work itself rather than a tool to get the work done!

Rather than having your e-mail client open all the time (and distracting you with pop-ups) consider switching it on only at specific times in the day. You will still be able to pick-up e-mails promptly but will have gained some uninterrupted time to get other important work done.

NB : you may even find requests for your action being done by someone else in the meantime!

Alternatively, if you use Outlook you can still keep it running but elect to switch off new mail alerts by Right Clicking the Outlook icon on the 'Tool Tray' (far right on the Taskbar) and disabling the option to 'Show New Mail Desktop Alert'.

6. Spread the Word

You can start using the above hints and tips above straight away.

Some are very easy and take little time to master whilst others will require discipline and time to perfect. This will help keep your e-mail manageable but to really 'tame' it you need to involve everyone in your organisation. This is not always easy, but is always worthwhile!

For example, you could organise an 'e-mail clearout week' where everyone (for just 1 week) adopts the methods outlined above and then feeds back on how useful they found them and what difficulties they experienced.

Armed with this knowledge you can then develop a corporate policy that works for you.

All this will require some investment in time and perhaps a more disciplined approach but it will be worth it in the end.

Don't forget time is a gift which you can never get back once it's gone so the sooner you start using it wisely the better!

Good luck.