

E-Mail Etiquette

COL Kenneth L. Alford, Ph.D.
National Defense University

E-mail is out of control, and you can help fix it by following the suggested rules of e-mail etiquette outlined in this article.

When I was first introduced to e-mail in the mid-80s, it was a wondrous invention. And I loved it! I could now reach out and asynchronously communicate with others regardless of time or space. The few e-mails that arrived each day were handled quickly and actually improved productivity.

From a trickle in the 1980s, e-mail grew to a flood in the 1990s. Today the flood has become a tidal wave. It is not uncommon for workers to receive more than a hundred (and in too many cases, hundreds) of e-mails every day. Important e-mails are too often buried in a sea of minutia, and e-mail can now actually reduce productivity.

Here are some simple rules to keep in mind so that you can be part of the solution and not add to this growing problem:

- **Put the Bottom Line Up Front.** In the first sentence of your e-mail, explain why you are sending the e-mail: what you need, what your position is, what the problem is, what your solution is, etc.
- **Keep It Short.** Get to the point. Avoid *stream-of-consciousness* e-mails that ramble aimlessly.
- **One Message, One Topic.** Limit each e-mail message to a single topic, request, comment, or position.
- **Talk Face-to-Face.** Too many e-mails are sent to people who work in the carrel or office next door. It is often easier and faster to talk with a co-worker than to send an e-mail message, but too many of us type and click instead of getting up and walking a few feet.
- **Keep Subject Lines Accurate.** If a message from a subordinate triggers a new thought, make sure that you change the subject line before you click *Send* on your return message.
- **Use Subject Tags.** One or two topic words at the beginning of an e-mail can make it easier for recipients. For example, tags like *Budget* or *Project Kolob* can help readers quickly evaluate incoming messages.
- **EOM Tag.** Establish an office code such as *EOM* [end of message] or *END* that can be placed at the end of an e-mail subject line to indicate that the entire message is contained in the subject line. For example, *Dept Mtg, Tues. 1100, Rm 101, EOM*. This saves readers

from having to open those messages.

- **Read Twice, Send Once.** Proofread your e-mails before you send them. Typos in dates, times, locations, and facts can result in tremendous wasted effort. Stop the problem at its source.
- **Self-Censor.** Never write and send an e-mail when you are angry or frustrated. You will regret it later.
- **Sending Messages.** While it may be easier to send your message using an organization-wide distribution list, the chances are good that everyone does not need to receive it. Send messages only to people who need to read them.
- **Forwarding Messages.** Whenever possible, do not forward messages!
- **Replying to Messages.** Just because an announcement was broadcast to everyone in your organization, it does not mean that you need to reply to everyone. Pick your *To* and *Cc* recipients with thought.
- **Less Is More.** Reply to or generate e-mail only when necessary. If you had a nickel for each “Yea, I think so, too” or “That’s a good idea” e-mail you have received, you could probably retire in comfort.
- **Use E-mail Tools.** Ensure you have a spam filter. Use rules and message filters to remove clutter from your inbox.
- **Check Attachments.** Take a moment to open each e-mail attachment before you send it – to ensure that you are attaching the latest version of the correct file.
- **Follow E-mail Etiquette Rules.** There are numerous Web sites that list rules of e-mail etiquette. Please take a few minutes to visit those Web sites, and encourage employees in your organization to do the same.

On days when e-mail is particularly oppressive (which lately has been most days), I sometimes fantasize about inventing a new product: *The E-mail Terminator*. It would work something like this: Every night at midnight, individual employee e-mail counters would be reset to zero. Throughout the day, the counter would keep track of the number of e-mails sent. When the counter reaches a preset number, the e-mail server would automatically turn off that employee’s ability to send e-mail. That user would have to wait until the following day to send e-mail again. (That

actually was not my first idea, but I think that the *Exploding Keyboard* idea might have difficulty receiving Occupational Safety and Health Administration approval.)

May your efforts to tame your e-mail be successful!◆

Additional Reading

1. E-mail Netiquette. Yale University Library <www.library.yale.edu/training/netiquette>.
2. E-mail Etiquette. West Virginia University <<http://oit.wvu.edu/support/tss/email/Email%20Etiquette.pdf>>.
3. Online Writing Lab. Purdue University <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_emaillett.html>.
4. E-mail Etiquette. Tufts University <<http://ase.tufts.edu/its/email/Etiquette.htm>>.

About the Author



COL Kenneth L. Alford, Ph.D., is a professor and department chair at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. He has served 26 years in the Army as a personnel, automation, and acquisition officer in a wide variety of duty assignments, including his previous position as an associate professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the United States Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. He has a doctorate in computer science from George Mason University, masters degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Southern California, and a bachelor’s degree from Brigham Young University.

National Defense University

408 4th AVE

Fort Lesley J McNair

Washington, DC 20319

Phone: (202) 685-4325

Fax: (202) 685-4175

DSN: 325-4325

E-mail: alfordk@ndu.edu