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*Chronicle Careers*<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/12/2008121501c.htm>**HEADS UP****E-Mails Are Forever**

E-mail has been around long enough that you'd think we would have learned how to handle it by now

By [GARY A. OLSON](#)

A noted scholar contacted me last month and asked me to write a column about e-mail etiquette. She was troubled by the "lack of respect" and "sometimes outright hostility" that some of her colleagues routinely conveyed in messages. E-mail, she said, seems to "give folks license to be rude and downright nasty."




Coincidentally, a department chairman had written with a similar request a few weeks earlier. He had found himself embroiled in a departmental squabble after offending some of his colleagues with an e-mail message in which he unintentionally sounded imperious and bossy. "I was simply trying to explain a new university policy," he said. "I didn't mean to sound like a dictator."

E-mail has been around long enough that you'd think we would have learned how to handle it by now. But I've heard plenty of similar complaints lately from other victims of e-mail hostility or misunderstanding. At professional conferences, deans and other administrators spend an increasing amount of time discussing the topic of problematic e-mail practices. By all accounts, the problem is only getting worse.

Administrators and faculty members use e-mail in a number of inappropriate ways. Some employ the "cc" function as a weapon. A faculty member becomes angry with a colleague and complains to that colleague in an e-mail message, but rather than resolve the matter privately, the sender will "cc" the recipient's supervisor and perhaps even the supervisor's supervisor. A private exchange that might have generated mutual understanding instead draws management into the dispute.

Some academics have made a habit of firing off angry e-mail messages to a host of recipients. I know an engineering professor who periodically becomes frustrated by some new university policy and responds by sending a heated e-mail message to the university's president, selected trustees, the provost, his dean, and every faculty member in his large department, excoriating "the university" for adopting the policy in question.



Dispatching a message to such a broad group of recipients is not only a breach of protocol (which dictates that you typically communicate to the next level above you), but it is invariably counterproductive: Your objective was to encourage people to take action, but the likely result is that

you have succeeded in casting yourself as a crank or a troublemaker — someone not to be taken seriously.

Other academics are utterly abusive in e-mail messages. It is difficult to imagine the senders uttering the same incendiary words in a face-to-face encounter. I've seen colleagues use e-mail to accuse each other of stealing research ideas, of being "stupid" and therefore not deserving of their doctorate, of being "a disgrace to the professoriate," and of "destroying the department." A colleague of mine refers to such unrestrained verbal onslaughts as "assault by e-mail."

The most generous explanations for that behavior are that the sender fired off the message in the heat of anger or was simply unaware of how insulting it would sound. Regardless of the rationalization, there is no excuse for abusive language in the workplace — none.

That said, it is true that you have little control over how recipients perceive the tone of your message, even a routine one.

A senior scholar in the humanities said she was puzzled when some of her doctoral students would send messages asking if she was angry or upset with them. "It took me a while to realize that they were responding to the pithiness of my own e-mails," she explained. "I use e-mail as infrequently as possible and only to transact business, so I am not chatty or especially warm." Her students confused brevity with disapproval — a perception that was undoubtedly magnified by the anxiety that dissertators experience. She began to make a special effort to make her messages less chilly.

Some people make the mistake of committing sensitive information to an e-mail message, forgetting that, once composed, it becomes a permanent record that can be shared with anyone and everyone. I know of a professor serving on a tenure committee who made the mistake of explaining to his colleague in an e-mail message why the committee had voted against her tenure. Obviously, it is unethical to discuss such personnel issues outside of the committee to begin with, but by revealing the decision-making process in writing, he inadvertently gave his colleague and her lawyer a document that later became the centerpiece of a successful lawsuit.

Here are some best practices to help faculty members and administrators avoid such unhappy situations:

Be judicious in deciding who should receive your message. Before adding any names to the "cc" list, ask yourself, Will adding someone to the list embarrass the main recipient or cause other difficulties? Am I sending the message only to those who need to read it? What is my real purpose here, and can I better achieve it in person, or on the phone? As a general rule, refrain from sending messages to a long list of recipients.

Consider the tone of your messages. Do you inadvertently sound condescending, angry, bullying, or inappropriate in any way?

People reading a message are not always able to "hear" tonal subtleties, so it is best to avoid sarcasm, irony, and satire in workplace e-mail messages. Similarly, using all uppercase may come across as shouting. Long-winded, rambling messages may sound argumentative, whiny, or even bad-tempered, while brief ones may seem cold and unfriendly. Avoid either extreme.

Resist the urge to fight fire with fire. The best response to a heated or insulting message is not to reply immediately. Good practice dictates that you take some time to cool off and reflect about how to answer. Some experts suggest that you compose a reply but then save it and reread it later. See if you feel the

same way. Above all, never send important e-mail messages when you are tired, angry, or upset — or late at night when you might be all three.

When you do reply to a negative message, avoid being drawn into a lengthy back-and-forth exchange that may only serve to escalate the conflict. Attempt to resolve the difficulty in person: "It appears that we are talking at cross-purposes; let's meet tomorrow and work this out."

Compose every e-mail message as if the entire world will read it. While you may well be engaging in a "private" exchange with a colleague or supervisor, e-mail is by definition a public forum. Be cautious and thoughtful about what you commit to writing and how you phrase your messages. If an issue is especially delicate or controversial, *pick up the phone*.

Above all, in workplace e-mail messages, be professional. Developing a professional ethos demands constant self-scrutiny. After writing the previous paragraph, I took a break to respond to a colleague's e-mail message requesting a document that I had already sent him. In resending the document, I unthinkingly reminded him that I had already sent it — a reminder that served no other purpose than to embarrass the recipient and make me feel petty.

I was quick to apologize. What you're going for here is a tone that is businesslike but warm, succinct but not telegraphic, and respectful rather than even subtly reproachful.

From time to time I receive a message saying something like, "John Doe hereby retracts the e-mail message recently sent to you." But you can never retrieve a message. That is precisely why observing the best practices of e-mail etiquette from the outset is so important. You can avoid a lot of regret by remembering a simple truth: E-mails are forever.

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