

email autopilot

“e” means “electronic” not “everything”

EDITORIAL | RONNIE MOORE

Before thinking about how to compose an effective email, it's critical to think about whether email is the right vehicle for the communication in the first place. Email has become such an integral part of our lives that many of us check it as soon as we get up in the morning, before we reach our destination in the airplane, before we go to bed at night. But the “e” in email means “electronic” not “everything,” so consider the following before going on “email autopilot.”



RONNIE MOORE

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Email is an effective communications vehicle when:

- ✦ **Simply downloading and uploading information.** Email is the cheapest and fastest way to send and receive information, including information, pictures, etc. via attachments. We are no longer dependent on fax machines, couriers, and the U.S. mail for the simple exchange of information. This is email at its finest.
- ✦ **You need to reach many people at the same time, often at different locations.** We work in a telecommute, business travel, global professional world. Email, instant messaging, etc. allow us to be in constant and immediate contact with our colleagues, no matter where we are geographically.
- ✦ **The message does not require repeated interaction.** Email's intended expedience and efficiency are compromised when the communication requires discussion. Here's what the "e" trail (email's version of a paper trail) looked like on a communication between Veronica and Susan:

Email #1 (from Susan to Veronica)
Veronica,
What do you think of the ABC Company as a provider of the computer training we need?

Email #2 (from Veronica to Susan)
Susan,
I don't know much about them. What similar companies have they helped with this type of training?

Email #3 (from Susan to Veronica)
I don't know. I'll find out. Do you know anything about their curriculum or trainers?

Email #4 (from Veronica to Susan)
I know a little bit about their approach to adult learning, and I don't know anything about their trainers. And that's critical, because the trainer will make or break even the best curriculum, especially in a subject like this, where it's technical, hands-on, and potentially tedious if not presented well.

And so on.

It took Susan and Veronica eight email messages to conclude this communication. Had they spent five minutes talking in person or by telephone, they would have been far more expedient and efficient.

Email is not effective when:

- ✦ **It is replacing face-to-face communication.** And here lies the human disconnect. We need to see each other's eyes. We need nonverbal communication. We need to hear someone's voice (even if it's on the phone).

Bob was promoted to management because of his technical skills and knowledge (he's a brilliant engineer), and strong work ethic. The problem, however, is that he was promoted for his ability to perform and manage functions, not people. Bob never learned how to manage and communicate with others.

Bob was concerned that he was not connecting with his staff, that he was "out of the loop." He felt he was in constant contact with his employees. But sending "Bob-O-Grams" from his computer all day does not translate to Bob communicating effectively. His employees were all within 50 feet of him, yet he chose to "communicate" with them by email.

- ✦ **Conflict needs to be resolved.** We often say things via email we would not say if we were not safely behind the screen. There are several reasons that communicating through conflict should occur in person, or at the very least by telephone, but never via email.

Face-to-face communication is a three "channel" experience. We send our message with our words (verbal channel), our voice (vocal channel), and our face and body (nonverbal channel). The same words communicated with a pleased voice vs. an angry voice will be received differently. We know that a smile vs. an angry face changes the meaning of our words. The problem is that we need all three channels; we need to use our words, our voice, our face and our body congruently to ensure that our intended message is received. When we use the telephone, we lose the third channel (the nonverbal channel) and now we are dependent on our words and voice only.

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Our listener can't see our face and body to get a more rounded idea of what we really mean. In fact, one of the first things that telephone skills training teaches is that if you provide customer service via telephone, you must get in the habit of smiling as you answer the phone. Your listener/customer can't see your smile so your listener must *hear* your smile.

The problem worsens when you try to resolve conflict by communicating via email. Now you're down to only one channel: your words. Without a voice or a face or body language, you have huge potential for misunderstanding because the person with whom you share the conflict, the person to whom you're sending your email, can not hear you or see you and must judge your true meaning and intent by your words only.

- ✦ **Communicating private/proprietary information.** The term “private email” is usually an oxymoron, especially in

the workplace. Read your employer's email guidelines. Chances are your employer can read your emails at any time. Chances are you can be held responsible for what you originate or what you forward, and you are not held responsible for unsolicited messages you receive. So think twice about that hilarious joke you're dying to send or forward to others. Is it appropriate in the workplace? Make sure that no message you originate or forward could be used against you in matters of discipline, termination, etc. Anything racist, sexist, or sexual should not originate from your email account and should stop with you. Save the questionable stuff, the personal stuff, for your personal email account.

Well-formatted, clear, concise email messages are critical to getting our messages read and getting the responses we need. But before you think about what you're going to communicate in that email, make sure email is the best way to go. 