

Communicating by email

A good practice guide

A Factfile provided by the Institution of **Engineering and Technology**



About This Factfile

The Institution of Engineering and Technology acts as a voice for the engineering and technology professions by providing independent, reliable and factual information to the public and policy makers. This Factfile aims to provide an accessible guide to current technologies and scientific facts of interest to the public.

For more Position Statements and Factfiles on engineering and technology topics please visit <http://www.theiet.org/factfiles>.

The Institution of Engineering and Technology

The Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) is a global organisation, with over 150,000 members representing a vast range of engineering and technology fields. Our primary aims are to provide a global knowledge network promoting the exchange of ideas and enhance the positive role of science, engineering and technology between business, academia, governments and professional bodies; and to address challenges that face society in the future.

As engineering and technology become increasingly interdisciplinary, global and inclusive, the Institution of Engineering and Technology reflects that progression and welcomes involvement from, and communication between, all sectors of science, engineering and technology.

The Institution of Engineering and Technology is a not for profit organisation, registered as a charity in the UK.

For more information please visit <http://www.theiet.org>

© The Institution of Engineering and Technology 2008

The Institution of Engineering and Technology is registered as a Charity in England & Wales (no 211014) and Scotland (no SC038698).

Enquiries

policy@theiet.org

Contents

It's good to talk!..... 3

Email requires extra politeness - not less 3

Size matters 3

Make it easy for recipients to file and retrieve emails..... 3

Don't add to email overload 3

It's good to talk!

Talking is the best form of communication as any potential misunderstandings can be cleared up on the spot. It's more cost effective and helps to build working relationships.

- Don't avoid people - If there's potential for confusion, clear it up in person or over the phone, then follow up by email if necessary. However, for less complex issues, a brief email will allow a busy person to answer at their convenience rather than be interrupted.
- Don't just assume it's been received! If it's important, use "return receipt" and also check and speak to the person where possible.
- Delegation over e-mail doesn't work! If you leave instructions for people on email when they are otherwise uncontactable, check with them as soon as you can. Check their understanding and acceptance of what you have asked for. The job's not done just because you hit the send button!
- Do not discuss confidential matters by email. Confidential matters are best discussed in person, by phone or by letter.

Email requires extra politeness - not less

Aim to be as polite in emails as you would be face to face, and then be more so. Without the visual clues of a person's expression, it is difficult to accurately interpret the meaning behind the words. Misunderstandings are much more likely and any offence caused, either intentionally or un-intentionally, is likely to escalate.

- Don't communicate over e-mail in the heat of the moment. If it's something you feel strongly about, wait 24 hours before replying. E-mails are out of your control the moment you send them and can easily be forwarded. They can deliberately or accidentally fall into the hands of unintended recipients and the record of your words could become an unwanted legacy.
- Don't copy to people unrelated to the original discussion without telling the rest of the addressees why. This is especially important when discussing contentious matters between a small number of people. It is rude to add a new person to the discussion without the others knowing why or, even better, asking them first.
- Do not criticise or defame people. This is very important. Do not criticise a person by email, speak to them about the issue you have with them. If you do feel you must criticise them in an email, do not copy or forward that to others. Do not criticise or defame third parties in emails. Again speak to the person concerned, or if a member of staff to them or their manager.
- Don't gossip by email. You are in danger of going too far and defaming people and as it is in writing you could end up in court!
- Don't use CAPITALS. It's considered shouting.
- Don't blind copy. People will think you are keeping secrets! However, in a work context there may be specific occasions where this is justified e.g. to keep a senior person informed while protecting their mailbox from receiving all the replies.

Size matters

- Don't send mail bombs. Tell people first before sending large files (or better still offer it to them first). Sending large files to people without checking can crash their system and cause huge inconvenience.
- If sending large attachments include the file size(s) in the Subject. This allows recipients to see the file sizes and to elect to retrieve/open it or not.

Make it easy for recipients to file and retrieve emails

- Use meaningful subjects in the "subject" field. Subjects which summarise the content in a few words help the receiver to find the message again. Messages with subjects such as Hi/Hello are likely to be deleted as spam.
- Start a new email thread for each new subject. Don't start new topics in the middle of email correspondence about another subject. This complicates following the line of discussion of a subject.

Don't add to email overload

Email overload is big problem, causing stress at the individual level and loss of efficiency for businesses.

- Consider whether recipients really need the mail or attachment. Don't use e-mail to prove to your public how clever and busy you are.
- Use clear succinct message titles. Increasingly emails are read on the move on mobile phones. A recipient doing a quick scan of their inbox will only see the first 4-5 words of your title.
- Don't grow mail messages unnecessarily. Set up your email program to include the original text of a message when replying so that the recipients have the context of your reply. However, trim as much repeated email as possible. If you decide to edit the original text, show where you have deleted/omitted text.
- Make proper use of the priority rating. High should be for urgent action only, allowing recipients to select urgent mails from the browser based on the red exclamation mark. Low should be used for information only (downward grey arrow symbol).
- Don't use "Reply All" unless really necessary. Be especially careful if the original mail is to a large group such as "All Staff". Be careful not to hit "Reply All" by mistake!



The Institution of Engineering & Technology
Michael Faraday House
Six Hills Way
Stevenage
SG1 2AY

01438 765690 - Policy Department
email: policy@theiet.org
<http://www.theiet.org/policy>
<http://www.theiet.org/factfiles>

© The IET 2008

The Institution of Engineering and Technology is registered as a Charity in England & Wales (no 211014) and Scotland (no SC038698).



This content can
contribute towards your
Continuing Professional
Development (CPD) as
part of the IET's CPD
Monitoring Scheme.
<http://www.theiet.org/cpd>