Corporate Communication

GUIDELINES REGARDING EMAIL ETIQUETTE

1

Imagine an ordinary day at work. You probably start in the morning with a cup of coffee, greet your colleagues and then the inevitable happens, you log in on your computer. For many of us the latter simple action has become automatic behaviour and we don't even realise that this act is dominating most of the work day. Emails constantly ask for attention and intrude our working schedule. It is rarely part of our job description, but more an underlying assumption of the functioning in nowadays' organisational life.

Taking this into account, it is no wonder that email etiquette should form an important part of your job skillset. The way you communicate says a lot about the type of employee you are: your work ethic, your commitment to professionalism and your attention to detail. While electronic shorthand may seem the best way to say something quickly, it is actually very impolite in the context of workplace email etiquette. It is also important to avoid the opposite. Sometimes email messages drone on forever and never quite make their point, which can be frustrating to the person reading the message.

The point of email etiquette is that it helps streamline communication and saves you valuable time in the end. By making your requests and information clear and concise, but still giving enough information so that your recipient understands what your message indicates, you will get the job done. At the NWU we have to represent ourselves and our institution in a professional way, and if you know the rules of email etiquette and put them to proper use, you will be able to deal with your daily tasks successfully. To enable you to work effectively, we suggest that all NWU employees take note of the following:

2 The basics

2.1 Empower yourself

Acquaint yourself again with how to use the NWU's email system, with all its tools and functionalities. Contact your campus IT helpdesk if you need any assistance.

2.2 Evaluate the importance of an email

- **Sometimes direct communication is the first step.**
  When a topic has lots of parameters that need to be explained or negotiated and will generate too many questions and confusion, don't handle it via email. Where possible pick up the phone, or organise a video call, and then communicate the decision via email – if it needs to be circulated within the department/school. Don't spam an entire unit and cause confusion before a decision has been made.
- **Avoid duplication, frustration and confusion.**
  Set clear guidelines on who sends out emails when and to whom. E.g. if certain information is applicable to all staff in a particular department, the director's secretary will send out the email to everyone, and line managers should not send the information to their subordinates again.
- **Refrain from unnecessary response**
  Don't reply with a 'Thanks' or 'Noted' unless it is stipulated that your feedback or approval is needed.
- **Acknowledge emails.**
  Respond as soon as possible to important emails and/or other emails where your input is needed. If you cannot provide an immediate answer, respond by telling the person you will get back to them, and flag the email to help you to remember to respond as soon as you have the appropriate answer.
- **Do not mark all emails as 'urgent' or 'reply requested'.**
  Carefully evaluate and determine the purpose and urgency of each email.

2.3 Use your NWU email address for official business

- Always use your NWU email address for official business. Should you need to use another email for work-related correspondence, make sure it's appropriate for the workplace and it conveys your name so that the recipient knows exactly who is sending the email.

- Always use a separate email address for personal matters.

2.4 Know your audience

- Do not assume the person receiving your email knows who you are or what your job entails. If uncertain provide the recipient with a brief reminder of who and from where you are.
- Be professional, specific and precise, and use a language that your recipient would understand. If you do not know which languages your recipient knows, stick to English.
- Your e-mail greeting and sign-off should be consistent with the level of respect and formality of the person you're communicating with. Also, write for the person who will be reading it – if they tend to be very polite and formal, write in that language. The same goes for a receiver who tends to be more informal and relaxed.
- Stick to a language that you and your recipient/s can understand and are fluent in – using different languages often lead to people feeling excluded. If the email string started in a specific language, make sure that the language continued with, will enable all recipients to understand, and if need be, give a short summary of what was discussed, before including any more people who might not have been conversant with the initial language used.

2.5 Respect privacy and confidentiality

- When discussing private matters or sharing confidential information, always start with a new email and don't respond to a previous email string from the particular person – you might unknowingly include people that were part of the previous email string in a confidential email.
- If in doubt, don't. Be very sure of the validity and purpose of your information before sharing confidential or sensitive information, as this may have serious repercussions for you and your employer.

2.6 Beware the angry email

In the heat of the moment we often say (or email) things that should have been left unsaid. Give yourself some time to cool off and then respond. Expressing anger, reprimanding or being unkind to someone via email are no-no's, especially combined with the dreaded 'reply to all'. Always remember that email correspondence lasts forever.

2.7 The ABC of CC/BC and reply to all

- **Carbon Copy (CC)**
  The CC field should only be used when someone should take note and/or are involved or know about the content of your email. Ask yourself if all the recipients really need the information in your message. Just CCing a colleague to keep them in the loop wastes time and often creates confusion. This also contributes to information overload and people eventually missing emails that are actually important and relevant to them.
  Don't CC some if:
  - To cover yourself or to remove responsibility.
  - To embarrass someone.
  - If you are expecting them to respond to the email. If this is the case, they need to be addressed in the 'to' field.
- **BLind Copy (BC)**
  Only use the BC field when you are sending an email to a group of people and you need to protect the privacy of your list.
- **Reply to all**
  Reply All is when you respond to everyone included in the email thread - therefore everyone in the 'to' or CC fields. Ask yourself if your response is applicable to everyone and whether or not it will be of value to them, if not, DON'T.

2.8 Use auto responses carefully (vacation/out of office rule)

Use an out of office auto reply when you will be out of the office for most of the day or longer and include the following:

- A subject line (e.g. meeting / on leave)
- Be specific – "Thank you for your email, I will respond as soon as I can" is useless.
- How long will you be unavailable for – including dates from and until when.
- Who to contact in your absence.
- NB: remember to deactivate your out of office reply once you are back in the office again.

2.9 Your email is a reflection of your character

Every email you send adds to or detracts from your reputation. If your email is scattered, disorganised and filled with mistakes, the recipient will be inclined to think of you as a scattered, careless, and disorganised person. Other people's opinions matter and in the professional world, their perception of you will be critical to your success

3 The perfect email

3.1 The importance of a subject line

- Include a clear, direct subject line, because with inboxes being clogged by hundreds of emails a day, it's crucial that your subject line gets to the point. It should be reasonably simple and descriptive of what you have written about. Example: "Meeting date changed".
- Never open an old email, hit 'reply', and send a message that has nothing to do with the previous one. Change the subject as soon as the thread or content of the email chain changes.
- Avoid being mistaken for spam. Avoid subject lines that are all in upper or lower case, and do not include URLs and exclamation points.

3.2 The email body

- **Keep it short and get to the point**
  - Write concisely, with lots of white space, so as to not overwhelm the recipient – feel free to use bullet points.
  - The person reading your email should not have to dig through several paragraphs in order to figure out what you're asking. You should state the purpose of the email within the first two sentences.
  - Clearly state whether this email is just for noting or if you need action to be taken. If it is the latter, state clearly what, when and who.
  - Avoid using abbreviations, emoticons, jargon or slang.
- **Email formatting and grammar**
  - Use professional fonts (opt for Arial, size 11 and preferably black)
  - Avoid using all capital letters, and use bold sparingly
  - Make use of commas and full stops to make the email easier to read
  - Use exclamation marks sparingly
  - Refrain from using social media language, shorthand writing and emoji's unless it is a personal conversation
  - Avoid images, quotes and abbreviations

3.3 Attachments

- Provide a warning when sending large attachments and don't send more than two attachments at a time.
- TIP: An alternative to sending large attachments is to is to use Google Drive, or to compress the files into a ZIP file, or to use WeTransfer.

3.4 Include a signature

- If you are sending general emails to colleagues, rather avoid including your official signature. Use your NWU signature rather when sending important official communication, and especially when emailing somebody outside the NWU environment.
- Click here to set up your NWU signature.

3.5 Add the recipient/s

- Add the main recipient's email address last, and then CC or BC the relevant people. Make sure that you add the correct recipients!
- You don't want to send an email accidentally before you have finished writing and proofreading the message. Even when you are replying to a message, it's a good precaution to delete the recipient's address and insert it only when you are sure the message is ready to be sent.

3.6 Proofread

- Check your spelling and grammar AGAIN and read your message out loud. Your ears will pick up something your eyes might skim over, and this is a good test for the tone of your email – it is easy to

come across as more abrupt that you might have intended. For best results, avoid using unequivocally negative words ("failure," "wrong," or "neglected"), and always say "please" and "thank you."

4 Useful resources

- Why writing email is a skill – and why learning it matters
- 20 best practices for email etiquette in the workplace
- Email etiquette: 10 golden rules for sending work emails
- The ultimate list of 19 email etiquette rules you should follow

Original details: (11664754) P:\5. Facilities\Guidelines regarding email etiquette.docm
25 June 2021

File reference: 5Pr_5.8.4.2_G