E-mail Best Practices Maximize Efficiency

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by Dan Barron

Can you imagine having to go to the fax machine every time you needed to send someone a message or document? Can you imagine if you had to write a letter and go through the process of "snail mailing" every time you wanted to reach out to someone professionally? True, the US Postal Service has its place in today's working world. But it's becoming increasingly apparent that e-mail is the communication tool for the new millennium. As with any tool, the better you are at using it, the more effective it becomes. This article presents e-mail best practices to help you and your organization work more efficiently.

Great Expectations

Most of us, regardless of our positions or work setting, use e-mail as our primary form of communication and collaboration with co-workers, vendors, and customers. The emergence of the Internet has allowed us to perform many tasks faster and more efficiently.

The value and benefits of e-mail communication, however, do not come without a price. How many of us go on vacation for a week only to return to an inbox filled with messages that need reading, responding, and processing? This tool that allows us to do so many things faster and better also brings with it responsibilities and the associated maintenance. E-mail is a means by which we represent ourselves as individuals and organizations. Because we can work quicker and more efficiently, expectations for getting more work done in the same period of time are greater.

Maximize Time, Productivity

In the AHIMA offices, to maximize our time and productivity, we developed our own best practices for e-mail use:

Be concise and to the point. Don't make e-mail messages longer than they need to be. Reading e-mail is more difficult than reading printed communications, and a long e-mail can be very discouraging. If additional discussion is merited, schedule a phone call or meeting to resolve issues.

Answer all questions. An e-mail reply must answer all questions to preempt further questions. Chasing after elusive information wastes your time and that of others and causes considerable frustration.

Know when to stop using e-mail. If you are discussing an issue via e-mail, stop after three responses. Direct communication may be a more efficient means of resolving the issue.

Do not overuse e-mail stationary and HTML. Use discretion when using stationary (colored backgrounds and graphics) or sending messages in HTML format. These types of messages take up more data space and processing power on the mail server. They can also take more time to download.

Use discretion when using the "high priority" function. If you overuse this option, it will lose its impact when you really need it.

Try to respond to an e-mail within 24 hours. People send e-mail because they wish to receive a quick response. Each e-mail message should be replied to within at least 24 hours, preferably within the same working day. If the e-mail is complicated, it's courteous to acknowledge receipt of the e-mail and indicate an intention to get back to the sender.

Use discretion when sending attachments. Try to avoid sending attachments to large lists of recipients. Also, try to avoid sending large attachments. Attachments larger than 100 KB should not be sent to many people at once. Doing either of these

can unnecessarily consume system resources and slow down the overall system. Many e-mail providers have a 2 MB limitation.

Use descriptive subject lines. Detailed subject lines allow recipients to scan a message, rather than opening it, to help the recipient prioritize.

Use signatures when appropriate. Providing customers, vendors, and external parties a professional signature with full contact information on the messages you send can save them time when they are trying to reach you. Also, auto-signatures can be used when providing responses to repetitive questions from external sources.

Use the out-of-office function appropriately. Inform message senders when you will be out of the office and when you will return. When appropriate, provide back-up contact information to allow senders alternative means of resolving pressing issues.

Be careful with formatting. Use good formatting of messages when possible. Use of carriage returns, proper spacing, tabs, and other formatting options can make e-mail messages easier to read. Avoid using large paragraphs unless they are necessary. Remember, with some format choices, the recipient might not be able to view the message, or might see different fonts than you intended. Using standard fonts and no background colors is best.

Never send e-mail in anger. Responding angrily to an e-mail that frustrates you can lead to the deterioration of working relationships. For a more professional approach, make arrangements to speak with the individual.

Freeing up time in the workplace allows us to pursue greater objectives. We hope you find these practices useful and adaptable to your work setting.

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