



Records Management Bulletin

Records management advice prepared for GNWT employees
by the Records Management Unit of Public Works and Services

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A Common Sense Guide to E-mail Etiquette

E-mail Guidelines

In Bulletin # 43 we introduced the **Guidelines for Managing Electronic Mail Messages**. The Informatics Policy Committee (IPC) approved the guidelines in May 2005. The Guidelines address many issues and concerns that people across the government have with e-mail, including the appropriate use of e-mail.

They Said What?

It is really amazing what some people will write in an e-mail message. They will write things in an e-mail message that they would never put in a letter or memo, or say to someone in person.

Some people forget that their government e-mail account does not belong to them. Whenever you send an e-mail message using your government e-mail account, you are acting as a representative of the government.

People also forget that an e-mail message is not like a telephone conversation. You can have an off-the-record telephone conversation, but e-mail messages are always on the record. Whenever you send an e-mail message, you leave a virtual paper trail that can spread all over the place.

So, use your common sense. Every e-mail message that you send is a reflection on your character, your department, and this government. Let's use e-mail to make the best possible impression.

What is E-mail Etiquette?

e-mail *n.* 1) = ELECTRONIC MAIL. 2) a message sent by e-mail. *v.tr.* 1) send e-mail to (a person). 2. send by e-mail.

etiquette *n.* 1) the conventional rules of social or official behaviour. 2a) the customary behaviour of members of a profession, sports team, etc., towards each other. 2b) the unwritten code governing this.¹

E-mail etiquette is simply a set of rules for how to write an e-mail message. Most of these rules are simply common sense. Unfortunately, sometimes it seems like common sense is not in great supply in some quarters. To address this, IPC included e-mail etiquette guidelines in the

Guidelines for Managing Electronic Mail Messages

(<http://www.pws.gov.nt.ca/pdf/recordsManagement/E-Mail-Guidelines.pdf>).

¹ **The Canadian Oxford Dictionary**, Katherine Barber, ed. (Don Mills: Oxford University Press Canada, 1998).

Addressing Messages to Other People

- Send messages to the people who need to see them.
- Send “carbon copies” (c.c.) to others who may be affected by the message or may have information or suggestions to add. It is not always necessary to copy your supervisor or your co-workers.
- Avoid blind copying (b.c.c.) messages to others. Blind copying suggests that you have something to hide.
- Do not forward e-mail messages inappropriately or unnecessarily. Do not forward messages without the sender’s permission.
- Do not forward junk mail, chain letters, jokes, or other unsolicited mail or advertising. If a friend sends you a joke at work, ask them to send it to your home e-mail address instead.
- When replying to a message, do not choose “reply to all” when it is only necessary to reply to the sender.

Writing Your Message

- Make subject lines meaningful. They serve the same purpose as the subject line in a letter or memorandum, and should reflect the content of the message.
- Stick to one topic per message.
- Keep the messages short, but not so short that the recipient cannot figure out what you are talking about.
- Consider the readability of the message. Use short lines and paragraphs, or present items in point form.
- Use language that is business-like and professional. Avoid slang. Use humour with care as it can be misinterpreted. Do not say anything that cannot be made public, put on file, or forwarded to others. Do not use e-mail to gossip or talk behind another person’s back.
- Avoid using specialized terminology, abbreviations, and jargon.
- Acknowledge text that is not your own and respect copyright. Do not alter text that someone else wrote, as it could change the original meaning.
- Check your grammar and spelling before sending your message.
- Do not write in all capital letters. This is considered shouting.
- Limit the number and size of attachments, and send them only if necessary. Shared network directories (H, I, and J drives for departments that are part of the Technology Service Centre) may be a better way to share documents with other employees.
- Avoid sending an attachment when the information could be included in the body of the e-mail message.
- Fancy backgrounds and smileys (emoticons), are not appropriate in a government e-mail message.

For more information, contact your department’s records coordinator, or contact the Records Management Unit at 920-3009 or 873-7446

Sending Your Message

- Mark messages as urgent only if they really are urgent.
- Do not expect an immediate response from your recipient. You may not believe it, but they are busy too.

Responding to Messages

- Respond to messages as quickly as possible. If you need a few days to respond, let the sender know that you need time.
- Avoid “flaming.” Do not reply in the heat of the moment. Calm down before you reply.
- If you are sending confidential or private information, a phone call or letter may be better.

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