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What does your e-mail say about you?

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Takeaway:
Author Paul Glen discusses how little mistakes in your e-mail messages can give the impression you're lazy, incompetent, inattentive, mistrustful, or unprofessional.

By Paul Glen

Every day, we send email to our colleagues and clients, but do you ever take a moment to think about what your messages really say about you? I'm not talking about the message that you're trying to send to someone else, but what the form and format of your emails communicate unintentionally. Too often, little details left out or inadvertently included can suggest that you're lazy, incompetent, inattentive, mistrustful, or unprofessional.

Here's my list of things to look out for in your email messages:

1. Spelling. Is everything spelled correctly? This should be a no-brainer with spell checkers, but read what you've written. Remember that spell checkers don't know when you've used a correctly spelled but incorrect word.

2. Grammar. Is the text grammatically correct? Grammar is not just for picky English teachers. If your writing is grammatically incorrect, it has a much higher probability of being misinterpreted by the recipient. Often, miscommunicating is worse than not communicating at all.

3. Signature Block. Do all of your emails contain a short, professional signature block with your contact information? Don't make people look in their contact manager if they want to call you. Just have your information inserted in every message. At the same time, you don't need to include an entire life history including your place of birth, favorite color and emergency contact list either.

4. Subject Line. Use the subject line to communicate useful information. Let the recipient know what you want them to know so that they decide what to do with it. Useless subjects or misleading ones can be really annoying.

5. Format. Have you written large impenetrable blocks of text in one long stream of consciousness paragraph? Break up your ideas so that they're easier to follow. It doesn't take much time. Just hit the return key whenever you are changing thoughts. But don't go too far in the other direction, leaving islands of text in fields of spaces. In short, make the format support the message.

6. Length. Emails should generally be short. Have you noticed that e-books have been a complete flop. In part, it's because people don't want to read long things on screens. (Of course there's an exception for email newsletters. ; -)

7. Urgent Indicator. This is one of my personal pet peeves. I hate it when people use the urgent indicator for clearly unimportant email. It gives the appearance that you have no regard for the time and attention of the reader or that you suffer from a personality disorder that leaves you with delusions of self-importance. Either way, it's not a good impression to give.

8. Bandwidth Usage. If you are sending a short one sentence email, don't send it with a huge graphic signature block. It just looks wasteful, and for those people who still get email over the phone line, it wastes lots of their valuable time. If there's no need for sending big files, don't.

9. Delivery Receipt. This one is another of my personal pet peeves. Unless someone is sending me a very important contract or time sensitive document, I want to read my email in private. When I see the little pop up box that says someone wants a return receipt for non-urgent email, I get the feeling that they don't really trust me to read their mail.

Every once in a while, before sending an email to someone else, I'll send it to myself just to see what it looks like in my Outlook In Box. It can be surprising, since I'll notice all sorts of things that I hadn't intended to communicate, just by reviewing it in advance. I encourage you to try it. You may be surprised to see how your emails reflect on you.

Paul Glen is the author of the award-winning book "Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology" (Jossey Bass Pfeiffer, 2003) and Principal of C2 Consulting. C2 Consulting helps IT management solve people problems. Paul Glen regularly speaks for corporations and national associations across North America. For more information go to www.c2-consulting.com. He can be reached at info@c2-consulting.com.

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