

# Email Ethics

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There continues to be a spectacular global growth of electronic mail (e-mail) both in terms of messages communicated and people using such facilities. Indeed there are now many people who cannot undertake their jobs unless they have e-mail facilities. Similarly there are many people who depend on e-mail in their social lives. This is the latest ubiquitous communication tool and will soon be accepted as an everyday facility in the same way as postal and telephone services.

We do need to be concerned about how and by whom e-mail is used. For example, in December the New York Times sacked 20 employees at a Virginia payroll processing centre for violating corporate policy by sending "inappropriate and offensive" e-mail and the US Navy reported that it had disciplined over 500 employees at a Pennsylvania supply depot for sending sexually explicit e-mail. Such e-mail is clearly unacceptable and those involved should be dealt with accordingly but how was it discovered? Maura Kelly reported that some companies, including the New York Times, only check employee e-mail when they have been apprised of a violation of corporate policy, but others routinely monitor computer activities to identify employees who are slacking on the job or whose adult surfing habits or offensive e-mail messages could potentially expose a company to sexual harassment suits. Ethical and social problems associated with e-mail misuse will become more serious as e-mail expands. Such problems must be tackled.

Several have put forward suggestions regarding how to address e-mail ethics and promote good practice. In her book *Netiquette*, Virginia Shea suggests some rules which might encourage a socially responsible e-mail culture. These rules are summarised as:

1. Remember the Human
2. Adhere to the same standards of behaviour on- line that you follow in real life
3. Know where you are in cyberspace
4. Respect other people's time and bandwidth
5. Make yourself look good on-line
6. Share expert knowledge

7. Help keep flame wars under control
8. Respect other people's privacy
9. Don't abuse your power
10. Be forgiving of other people's mistakes

In New Zealand, the University of Massey has developed a code of ethics for the use of electronic mail. The code might form the basis of an approach for many organisations world-wide. Clearly it would need to be adapted to local needs and perceptions. The code's main components are: Forged e-mail. No electronic mail may be sent so as to appear to originate from another person, with the intention of thereby deceiving the recipient or recipients.

#### **Menacing e-mail**

No electronic mail may be sent that is abusive or threatens the safety of a person or persons.

#### **Harassing e-mail**

No electronic mail may be sent such that a person or persons thereby suffers sexual, ethnic, religious or other minority harassment or in contravention of human rights. The charge of harassment may be based on the content of the electronic mail sent or its volume or both.

#### **Privacy of e-mail**

No person may access or attempt to access electronic mail sent to another user, without the permission of that user, except when necessary as part of that person's duties in respect of the operation of the electronic mail system.

—See ([http://its.massey.ac.nz/policies/email\\_policy.pdf](http://its.massey.ac.nz/policies/email_policy.pdf)) for further details.

In many respects e-mail is a virtual frontier land. You need to be mindful of its pitfalls and traps. Never assume your e-mail messages are private nor that they can be read by only yourself or the recipient. It is very easy to forward an e-mail message to thousands of people. Unless you have complete trust that the recipient of your mail will keep it confidential, assume complete exposure to the rest of the world. It might be wise never send something that you would mind seeing it reported in the news media.

Everyone reading this article is likely to use e-mail. So based on your experience consider this interesting scenario written by Alpeda.

You are a computing officer in a reasonably large company with supervisor privileges on the computer. Over a weekend a crisis arises which demands attention and your superior phones in to ask you to get some information for her. She tells you that the vital sales report relating to a key contract that she needs is attached to an e-mail message sent between two of the directors on the previous Friday. She asks you to look at the message and forward its contents to her at home.

Would you do exactly as she asks or do as she asks but with reservations or refuse to carry this out and why?

—See [http://www.alpeda.com/fr\\_1700.htm](http://www.alpeda.com/fr_1700.htm) ([http://web.archive.org/web/19991009205736/http://www.alpeda.com/fr\\_1700.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/19991009205736/http://www.alpeda.com/fr_1700.htm)) where the test was, no longer exists, available via (<http://web.archive.org>)

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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