Email Protocol Guidelines

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Updated September 12, 2011

Email is the communication medium of choice for engineering project teams. It’s quick and easy, asynchronous, and persistent.

Busy people receive 50 to 100 emails a day. If you want to reach them, you have to be clear, direct and to the point. If the meaning is not clear, you can waste days emailing back and forth trying to sort things out.

Here are some guidelines to make your email communication more effective.

• **Subject line.** Always include a meaningful subject line. I delete emails without

subject lines. “Hi” is not a subject; neither is “Snowmobile Team”. “Agenda for Snowmobile Team Thursday Meeting ” is a subject.

A missing or inappropriate subject may get trapped by spam filters.

Use a new email, with a new subject line, to start a new subject. Don’t find, and reply to, an old email with an old subject line when you want to open a new thread of discourse – it’s very confusing, and makes you look sloppy. And the recipients might not even read it, if they think it’s about an old matter that is now closd.

• **How many topics per email?** Generally, it’s best to have one topic per email, with a subject line that describes the topics. That way people can read the message, act on it, and file it appropriately, and find it later.

If an email announces a meeting on Thursday, and, by the way, Bill needs to order his parts from Supplier B because the Supplier A is out of stock, (1) the second message may get lost, (2) we don’t know where to file this message for later reference.

• **Identify yourself and your project team**, at the top of your message. Most of us are involved in several projects and activities, and sometimes messages get sent to us by mistake.

**• Action.** When I receive an email that is addressed to an alias or group address, I

don’t know whether I am an “action” recipient or an “information” recipient.

Always identify anyone who needs to take action, and what action they should

take:

o Please review and comment

o Request approval for a large purchase

o Answer this question

o Please grade the attachment

• **Whose responsibility?** If you send an “action” message to two people, which

one will respond to it? Neither! Specify one person, who will own the

responsibility.

• **Large attachments.** Don’t send huge attachments. They clog up the system. Try

to keep attachments under 10 megabytes. You can transfer large files on a memory stick, or put them where they can be downloaded using a service like Google Drive or DropBox.

**• Attachment file names.** Give files meaningful and identifiable names, so the recipient can find them later. For example, if you send a copy of your resume, don’t call it “resume.pdf”; include your name, like “Sean\_Smith\_resume.pdf”.

**• Principle of Robustness. (Postel’s Law) .** “Be conservative in what you send; be liberal in what you accept.”

* Refers to implementation of Internet protocols
* Useful for project communications
* “Don’t make me think” – include all the information even if it should be obvious or straightforward for the receiver to figure it out.
  + The more work the receiver has to do, the greater the likelihood of a mistake
  + The work invested by the sender is saved many times over by the receivers.

**• Acknowledge.** If someone sends you a legitimate request, answer it right away,

even if you don’t plan to take action immediately. Then they know you received

it, and they won’t keep trying to get your attention.

**• Close the loop.** When you finish a piece of business, as in a series of email

exchanges, don’t leave the conversation unfinished, even if no more action is

required. If someone says, “I did the thing you requested”, send a short “Thanks”.

This lets them purge this matter from their schedules and their minds. It’s also

polite, like saying “Goodbye” on the telephone; it’s good for your working

relationship.

**• Timeliness**. Give your recipients time to receive, read, digest, and act. I try not to

read my email too often; it’s more efficient in batches. Schedule meetings at least

3 days in advance.

**• Face-to-face or telephone.** Emails are great because they are asynchronous; both parties don’t have to be present to communicate. Their information bandwidth is limited, however, and the time lag between messages can be long. If a matter is urgent, and there is a lot discuss, it’s probably better to do it in person or by phone.