

The Wonders and Horrors of E-Mail

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We all marvel at technological innovations. Many emerging technologies help us save time, reduce redundancy, and ease the burdens we have to bear. There is a downside too. When gadgets allow, invite, or seduce us into being too fast, too clever, or too voluminous in our quest for success, we sometimes find ourselves making horrendous mistakes that we regret. Such is the case with e-mail.

E-mail is a godsend to many; it allows rapid transmission of messages; it allows us to respond to messages cheaply and easily; and it allows us to send messages all around the globe cheaply. E-mail also invites hurried, not well thought out, impulsive, and incomplete messages. These defective messages have gotten many people into trouble.

E-mail users have been conned into accepting fragmented ideas as whole, accepting the excuse that completeness is not what e-mail is all about; to fire off replies on-the-spot; and to send messages impulsively when the thought enters their mind. Many e-mail messages that come across my computer screen are too terse; they invite me to fill in the blanks [metaphorically] and such assumptions on my part are subject to gross error. It is not solely my fault if I fill in the blanks erroneously; it is a shared blame. The time it would take for me to ask for more information, clarification, or context and to await a second return message is usually equal to or greater than what a thought

out, well constructed original message would have taken.

Many e-mail users have sent off replies in anger, confusion, excitement, or pressure only to regret having done so seconds after the return button has been pushed. The seduction of an immediate response has another tentacle: we are **expected**, by many on the other end of the e-mail tie, to respond immediately, just because we can! I have never received an e-mail message asking for a response **and** asking me to take my time to deliver a well thought out answer.

Impulsive messages can have awful unintended consequences. Such messages are sometimes sent to the wrong people, causing them discomfort, embarrassment, and sometimes worse consequences. Impulsive messages often lack sensitivity to others. Message by impulse can ruin relationships by saying exactly what is on the sender's mind when, at calmer times, we would never say such things that directly, bluntly, or callously.

Mechanically, there are no restraints on message sending. Careful, prudent e-mail users would probably benefit from some self-imposed rules:

1. Write, proofread, and edit messages you intend to send via e-mail away from the computer.
2. Unless absolutely required, do not reply to e-mail messages until any emotion stirred up by an original message or circumstance triggering an e-mail message impulse has dissipated.
3. Don't take the e-mail you receive at total face value; the other person may have been impulsive. Check out the meaning in received messages before you act on them.

E-mail is not totally private. Computer center administrators monitor e-mail for legitimate purposes; however, not everyone is honest or discrete. Do not send sensitive, confidential, or embarrassing material via e-mail. Lt. Colonel Oliver North discovered, to his horror, the retrievability of e-mail messages during Congressional hearings.

E-mail **is** wonderful, as long as you recognize its and your shortcomings. Restraint, prudence, and common sense need to be exercised to ensure that e-mail senders and receivers are not hurt, embarrassed, or placed in employment, legal, or social jeopardy.