

## **E-Mail's Impersonal Tone Easily Misunderstood Conflicts can arise from mistyped, misperceived messages**

Sarah Schafer, Washington Post

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Washington -- The e-mail seemed so innocent. "Betty, hi," he remembers cheerfully typing to his colleague. "I haven't been successful reaching you by phone, so I'll try e-mail instead."

And so Bill Lampton -- then an employee of a large hospital -- dashed off the rest of his note on some trivial office matter and hit the send button.

Betty never got past the greeting.

"I have no idea what you mean about my not returning phone calls," Lampton recalls Betty firing back. "To have you accuse me of ignoring your calls is unthinkable and inexcusable. . . . As to the purpose of the e-mail that you sent me, I prefer not to respond, as I dislike dealing with anyone who assumes the worst of me."

Lampton had learned the hard way -- as have many managers and workers -- that there can be serious downsides to relying on exchanges over the ether. The same qualities that made e-mail such a boon to office efficiency -- the air of informality, the speed with which someone can compose and click -- are often the cause of countless, costly misunderstandings that can stall team projects, turn co-workers against one another or their bosses, and twist simple negotiations into months-long gripe sessions.

Although research firms are just beginning to study the effects of e-mail-induced disputes, some of the same companies that once vigorously promoted e-mail use are now taking steps to limit it. Some personnel managers, for example, have asked employees to e-mail only utilitarian information, such as scheduling requests, according to Vault.com, a workplace research firm in New York.

Companies such as Cisco Systems Inc. have tried to build more face time into the workplace by designing work spaces that encourage employees to mingle and communicate directly.

In a recent survey of 1,000 workers, Vault found that 51 percent of respondents said that the tone of their e-mails is often misperceived -- as angry, or too casual or abrupt, for example. One survey respondent said, "I wrote a question to (my boss) one day; she thought I was being insubordinate by the tone. I almost lost my job!"

The problem, say those who have studied online communication, is that the rapid-fire e-mail message arrives without all the facial expressions, body language and vocal cues that richly color most human conversation. Humor, sarcasm and double entendres -- best delivered with a smile, a raised eyebrow or smirk -- often fall flat or are taken literally in e-mail exchanges.

"We have millennia of history in learning how to manage an impression in person," said Patricia Wallace of the University of Maryland, author of "The Psychology of the Internet." "We know how to soften what might seem like an abrupt remark with a smile or a wink . . . but we are clumsy with the new tools online, and people are making blunders all over the place."

The absence of conversational cues is especially problematic at work, where the stakes are higher than in a friendly exchange. If someone misreads a comment from a buddy as accusatory, he can pick up the phone to ask what gives. That same comment from a boss can leave employees cowering in their cubicles.

That's what happened when small-business owner Jessica Lipnack sent what she thought was a simple request to her head of training, Carrie Kuempel, who had helped her put together a slide presentation for a venture-capital conference.

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Just before heading out the door one afternoon, Lipnack said she got a call from her lead investor saying that he didn't like a phrase in one of the slides. Lipnack dashed off an e-mail to Kuempel along these lines: "Hey here's some feedback from Bruce. Just one person's opinion, but he thinks (this phrase) looks too trivial."

Kuempel panicked, thinking she had to redo the whole thing -- months of work. It wasn't until hours later, after rereading the e-mail and speaking to Lipnack, that Kuempel realized she'd overreacted.

Peer-to-peer e-mail can also spark an office frenzy. At ProSavvy, a Colorado marketing firm, a joke at the end of a hastily written e-mail from one co-worker to another had the entire marketing department playing interpreter, according to public relations manager Niki Wheeler.

One employee from marketing stayed until midnight working on a poster for a client and dropped it off on the project leader's desk. The next day, he got an e-mail from the project leader saying the poster looked great. But the last line read, "Thanks, I own you!"

The marketing person took the last line as a slight -- as in "I could get you to do anything, couldn't I?"

His colleagues told him they were sure it didn't mean that, "but we weren't sure if (the sender) was trying to be funny or maybe meant to say owe you," Wheeler said.

As it turned out, the sender deliberately typed "own," but had meant it in jest, not in a flash of superiority. Unfortunately, the recipient had to stew for a week because the project leader was on a trip.

When someone sends an e-mail, "it's very hard for the other person to know what the exact tone and rhythm is and it's very easy for them to misinterpret what you say," said

Peter Wylie, a Washington psychologist who counsels business partners.

Even letter writing is safer than e-mail, experts say, because of protocols developed over hundreds of years to show proper respect to the recipient. High schools and colleges spend entire classes, even courses, on the etiquette of business writing.

To cut down on confusion, some people have devised ways to inject tone and emotion into their electronic exchanges. There are the abbreviations such as LOL, which stands for "laughing out loud." And then there are the "emoticons," symbols that have evolved into a sort of shorthand for simple emotions. Among the most widely recognized emoticons are :-), the smiley face, which is often used to mean "this is a joke," and :(, the sad face, which can mean "too bad." But while this form of online slang has been mastered by many teen and college-age e-mail addicts, it has not caught on in the workplace.

"Emoticons are very blunt instruments and look trivial at work," Wallace said.

The anonymity people feel behind a screen and keyboard often exacerbate e-mail miscommunications. Simple note exchanges often devolve into venomous sessions of e-mail pingpong.

"The overall effect (of e-mail) makes for a kind of disinhibition, and people say things that they would not normally say face to face or any other way, and it gets some people in trouble," said Kerry J. Sulkowicz, a New York psychiatrist and president of the Boswell Group, a consulting firm on the psychology of management.

Sometimes it takes good old-fashioned chemistry to solve a problem, Wylie said. "If you're bent out of shape with me, you can see me nod respectfully and really convey to you that I . . . understand your point of view, how you feel."

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Two people can get from conflict to resolution sometimes through nothing more than a pat on the back or a squeeze of an elbow, he said: ``All of a sudden, some kind of understanding develops. You just can't do that in e-mail."

### E-MAIL'S ROLE

A recent survey shows that e-mail's place in the office can be limited.

I would ask for a raise:

- --In person, 96.3 percent
- --Via e-mail, 2.1 percent
- --Via the phone, 1.6 percent

I would offer my resignation:

- --In person, 70 percent
- --Via letter, 25.5 percent
- --Via e-mail, 3.5 percent
- --Via the phone, 1 percent

I would report wrongdoing:

- --In person, 72.2 percent
- --Via e-mail, 20.5 percent
- --Via the phone, 7 percent

I would offer praise to a co-worker:

- --In person, 64.9 percent
- --Via e-mail, 30.5 percent
- --Via the phone, 4.6 percent

Source: Vault.com