

E-mail can be a boon or a disruption to business

By DELON SHURTZ
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In an episode of Seinfeld, Jerry is sitting in a cafe discussing with a female acquaintance technology, particularly the Internet and electronic mail.

After she leaves, Jerry asks himself, "what the hell is e-mail?"

These days, when most homes and just about all businesses have the Internet and e-mail, that question would seem odd indeed. In fact, e-mail has become as much a part of the workplace as the telephone or fax machine.

"I would say it's probably critical to the workplace," says Trevor Woods, executive director of information technology at the University of Lethbridge.

"It has changed the way we work."

E-mail has replaced memos, time-consuming meetings and even telephone conversations. Often, one of the first tasks employees perform when they arrive at work is to check their e-mail messages. Reading and then responding to those messages can be challenging, however, especially when there may be hundreds of them. It's not uncommon for Woods to receive 100-300 messages a day, all work related.

"Managing messages takes a lot of effort."

That's why Woods says it's important people learn to budget their time and manage their e-mail well.

There are 15,200 e-mail accounts at the university, of which 2,100 are employee accounts on Exchange. The rest are student, alumni or community accounts. On average, 168,000 messages coming from outside the institution are not accepted for various reasons. About 138,000 messages are scanned, determined to be spam, and deleted; 600 messages are scanned, determined to be viruses, and deleted; 25,000 messages are probably spam, but may be legitimate, so they are delivered; and 31,000 messages are probably not spam and delivered. These numbers do not include e-mails sent from within the university.

While there are drawbacks, Woods believes there are more benefits to e-mail if it is used properly. But it may have reached a point where many people rely too heavily on the technology.

"People are saying they can't live without e-mail," says Lyn da Kavanaugh, owner of WOW Communications, a marketing, consulting and training business in Lethbridge and Calgary.

While that's pretty powerful testimony to just how important e-mail has become in the workplace, Kavanaugh also recognizes it has its disadvantages.

"When you're using it instead of talking to someone, then we have a breakdown in communication," Kavanaugh says.

She says people often rely too heavily on the technology and use it inappropriately. Bosses have been known to fire employees by e-mail, while others sometimes use it to say something they normally wouldn't say to another person face to face. Even when e-mail is used for good, the recipient may sometimes misinterpret the message because there isn't any visual contact.

"In e-mail, you can't get that body language."

E-mail is also perfect for receiving unsolicited, bulk junk mail, called spam, as well as jokes and personal messages that cause employees to waste valuable time.

While e-mail used improperly can waste time and cost companies the thousands of dollars in lost productivity, used appropriately e-mail can also improve productivity and save thousands of dollars.

"It can be efficient if it's used properly."

Here are some tips for e-mail use in the workplace:

- Use descriptive or meaningful subject lines. Address one subject per e-mail whenever possible, and stick to the subject of your message.
- Be concise and use a lot of paragraph breaks. Keep paragraphs short and don't send long e-mails.
- Include the message context. When replying to an e-mail, include the text of the original message, but quote only the relevant portions.
- Don't enter the recipient's e-mail address(es) until you are ready to send the message. This prevents a half-written e-mail from accidentally being sent.
- Respond swiftly, preferably within the same working day, and certainly within 24 hours. If longer, send a reply saying that you have received the message and you will get back to them.
- Don't use e-mail when a telephone conversation or a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate or will prevent misunderstandings.
- Use the Bcc: field when sending an announcement or newsletter message to many people. The "To:" or "CC:" field publicizes someone's e-mail address without their permission.
- Only use "reply to all" if you really need your message to be seen by all the recipients of the original message.
- Don't forward a potentially sensitive e-mail unless you have permission.
- Don't send an attachment if the content can be written in the body of the e-mail.
- Immediately and clearly state the purpose of the e-mail in the body of the text.
- Never make comments that you would not want others to read or that are libelous, sexist, discriminating, or offensive in any way.
- Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions.
- Do not write in CAPITALS. IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING.
- Don't use abbreviations or emoticons unless you know the recipient understands their meaning.
- Be careful with formatting. Remember that the recipient may not be able to view formatting (bold, colour, etc), or might see different fonts than you intend.
- Reread your e-mail before sending. Consider the tone and content of the message from your recipient's perspective.
- Use a signature file that includes your contact information.

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Information technologies executive director Trevor Woods, in the University of Lethbridge's main data centre containing servers, hard drives and core networking components, says e-mail is critical in the workplace. Herald photo by Ian Martens.