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Email etiquette

Email may have been around for over 20 years, but in the last five its use has proliferated. With the increasing popularity of mobile devices such as PDAs, Blackberries and iPhones we live in a truly 24/7 world of email communications.

Because of the relative degree of informality involved in email exchanges – for many of us we use it as much in our personal lives as in our work – and the speed at which we communicate it is easy to make mistakes and cause offence or misunderstandings. Below are some hints and tips on email etiquette to make life easier for you and the recipients of your messages.

Email do's

- Always start a new email exchange with the name of the person it is being sent to at the top and your name at the bottom
- Make sure your 'email signature' is at the bottom of the mail and always use the standard institute signature. This should include the IOE's name and address and your institute telephone numbers. Occasionally it may also include Institute events and activities that you wish to promote, but this should be checked with marketing.
- Give the same thought and care to the composition of an email as you would to a written communication. Given the more informal nature of email communication there is a risk that they take the form of a 'stream of consciousness'; this is neither helpful nor fair on the recipient. It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure that the message is understandable and that required actions are clear.
- Do remember that the laws relating to written communication also apply to email messages, including, but not restricted to defamation, copyright, freedom of information, wrongful discrimination, obscenity and fraudulent

misrepresentation. With modern technologies it is nearly impossible to delete a mail so just because you've removed it from your sent box that doesn't mean it's gone. The bottom line is email is not private and you shouldn't write anything that you wouldn't say in a room full of people.

- Make sure that the content is relevant to the person receiving it, including cc recipients. We all have enough to do without wading through unnecessary emails
- Be as concise as possible. Brief messages are much more likely to be read. If your message is long and/or complicated write it using a product such as word and then attach it to an email with a brief explanation of what it is
- Be security conscious. The Data Protection Act requires that adequate security be maintained to protect personal information held on emails and related archives. Never share your email ID and password with others.
- Think about your content, spelling and punctuation. As recent cases demonstrate, it's possible for an email to be forwarded to a much wider audience than you intended.
- Think about your tone, always be polite; Terseness and humour or irony can be misinterpreted with the absence of audio and visual indicators
- Only include someone on a cc list if there is an action for them and then make it clear what you expect of them
- Always reply to an email where a reply is needed, even if only to acknowledge it and to say that you'll be in touch later
- Do put an out of office message on when you are going to be away for more than a day saying when you are going to return. Remember to include a contact name, phone number and email for someone else in case the enquiry is urgent, and check with the nominated person that they will be around while you're not.
- Do remember that you can still pick up the phone or talk with someone face to face. Avoid sending emails to colleagues in the same office when it is just a short enquiry

Email don'ts

- Don't conduct arguments in public by cc'ing the rest of the world. Just because you can copy in the whole of the hierarchy of an organisation doesn't mean you should
- Don't reply to an email when you're angry, you won't be able to retract it. Walk away, count to a thousand, make a cup of tea – anything to avoid you sending something you'll regret later.
- Don't write in CAPITALS, it's the equivalent of shouting by mail and very rude. Likewise, avoid emphasizing in red, it can feel like a reprimand.
- Don't over-use punctuation. Excessive use of full stops and exclamation marks can make text very difficult to read
- Only mark something as urgent if it really is urgent. And if it is that urgent it's probably best to give someone a call and let them know that there is a mail on its way and it needs their attention.
- Don't make fun of another person's style or spelling. Email is often used for fast and hurried communication and people make mistakes.
- Don't say anything in an email that you wouldn't say in a room full of people. That includes comments about 3rd parties
- Don't forward on chain letters. These steal precious space on the server, take up your colleagues time and can be really annoying
- Don't send sensitive information or communications by email. If you have to communicate something sensitive or personal then a memo or letter would be more appropriate

Please remember, if you do receive an e-mail that you feel is inappropriate in content and/or format, you can always ask your line manager or Human Resources for advice on how to respond.