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So You Can Send E-Mail, but Is It Any Good?

By JOHN MORAN
HARTFORD COURANT

It's startling how quickly e-mail has become an essential means of business and personal communications. Not long ago, having an e-mail address was a status symbol, a sign that you were on the cutting edge of advancing technology. Now, however, you're regarded as something of a dinosaur if you don't have an e-mail address.

But having access to e-mail and learning how to use it effectively are two different things. Unlike the telephone, that other communications breakthrough of the 20th century, e-mail isn't easy. You have to write.

Therein lies the problem. Writing is difficult. Writing well is even more difficult. And writing quickly and well is near impossible. Yet the speed and informality of e-mail encourages us to dash off haphazard notes. That may be fine for friends and family, but it can be downright dangerous when used with colleagues, superiors, clients and suppliers.

"When it comes to e-mail, many people don't think before they write," said Dianna Booher, author of "E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication" (Pocket Books, \$14.95). "People don't realize the impact of their e-mails."

You've probably experienced this yourself. A colleague or boss sends you an e-mail that seems dismissive. Offended, you consider firing back with an e-mail that will blister their eyeballs. Then you realize that perhaps the person who sent the e-mail just didn't appreciate the impact of their words.

Bad enough to receive one of those e-mails, but what if you're the person who sent it? Do you want to be seen by others as arrogant? And what if the offending e-mail gets forwarded throughout the company for all to see?

Booher has a wealth of suggestions that can help e-mail users avoid some common traps.

For starters, think hard about what you want to say and how you want to say it. "Brief is good, blunt is not," Booher says.

E-mail doesn't permit the same kind of facial expressions, hand gestures and verbal inflections that help communicate in spoken conversations. So clarity is paramount when writing e-mail.

To avoid ambiguity, be specific, Booher advises. Don't just say, "See you next Tuesday." Instead, write "See you at 4 p.m. Tuesday, May 29, at Joe's Restaurant on Main Street."

Also, be succinct. Keep e-mail to a single topic. Put the key point in the first sentence, and the action you're planning or requesting in the second, Booher says.

Finally, before you hit the "send" button, ask yourself whether this message will be useful to the intended recipient. Booher calls this the "So what?" test. If the value of the message isn't obvious, don't send it.

Most people know how to send e-mail. The key now, says Booher, is to teach them how to use it.