



When You ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY Should *Not* Use Email

A CIVILIZED LIST
BY DAVID SHIPLEY & WILL SCHWALBE



JUST BECAUSE EMAIL IS GOOD FOR SOME THINGS DOESN'T MEAN IT'S GOOD FOR EVERYTHING.

One of the biggest problems with email is that people use it reflexively: Get an email? Reply by email! Have a random thought while you are sitting next to your desktop or laptop or when your handheld is at hand? Fire off an email! Sure, there are good emails and bad emails. But there are also a lot of emails that never should have been emails in the first place: They should have been calls, letters, visits, or nothing. Everytime you choose a form of communication other than email, or choose not to communicate at all, there's a bonus: Simply the best way to cut down on email is to send fewer emails.

And yet, the real benefit of sending fewer emails is far greater than a blessedly more sparsely populated inbox. Consider this: Too many of us send emails that seem like a good idea at the time but tear at the fabric of our relationships and create damage that can last forever. And too many of us send email that is just plain inconsiderate—email that makes our world a slightly less pleasant place to work and live. There is a huge social and karmic dimension to indiscriminate and inappropriate emailing. And there is a huge karmic benefit to knowing when to stop.

What follows is a list of the times and occasions you absolutely, positively should not send email. Your aim should not be to follow it religiously, but to come up with your own list—and stick to it. Sure, good fences make good neighbors. But that means good neighbors make good fences. These are ours. And until you build your own, you may want to make them yours.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE RIGHT

Remember that kid on the playground? The one who gleefully sang, “I’m right, I’ve always been right; You’re wrong, you’ve always been wrong; Who’s sorry now?” as he ground your face into the dirt with his sneaker? Don’t be that kid. No one liked him and he’s probably now serving time.

Email is the perfect “I told you so” medium. The other day, we got stood up for dinner. The email trail was clear. We were right. The stander-up was wrong. It was all there in bits and bytes, easily forwardable. We don’t always do the right thing, but this time we did. We didn’t forward the email trail to prove that we were totally right and the stander-up totally wrong. We called her cell-phone. Apologized for any part we might have played in the confusion. And then we rescheduled. We are pretty sure she knew that we knew that she knew she got it wrong. And we are pretty sure, too, that she appreciated that we didn’t grind her face into the mud (metaphorically, of course). We have high hopes that she will cut us slack the next time either of us messes up.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE WRONG

You can and should email when you are a little wrong. But not when you have deeply wronged someone. Email is a good place to start an apology; however, because it’s so easy to apologize on email, people don’t value an email apology very highly. If you’ve really offended someone, you are going to want to apologize on the phone, by letter, in person, with a gift, or by employing all of these. Repeatedly.

And, in the interest of healthy self-preservation, do remember that email is permanent and searchable. Your admission of guilt on email can go wide. Fine, if you are fessing up to a minor social transgression. But if you are admitting culpability for a huge company-wide failing, you might want

to check with the folks above you and with the legal department to make sure they see the thing the way you do, and think the forum you've chosen for your apology is the best one. This isn't about being a weasel—it's about making sure you are speaking appropriately for your company and not just on your own behalf, as you would be if you were writing about a personal matter from your home.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE MAD

Studies have shown that we are all far more sensitive to the pain we receive than the pain we inflict. We think we are replying in kind to something that has made us mad; in reality, we are replying with far greater force. Hence, the flame war. (Those nasty email exchanges where people send vile messages back and forth).

There's something about email that encourages us and eggs us on. On email, we are more intemperate than we usually are. And we tend to forget, in the heat of composing a blistering missive, that email is searchable, forwardable, and permanent. (We know we've already reminded you of that; but it's something we all can't remind ourselves of too much). As for writing a draft on email just to make yourself feel better? Well, there's something about that "Send" key that is like a magnet—and something about an agitated state of mind that causes us to be drawn to it. The email you never meant to send is the very one you wind up sending accidentally.

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There are ways to make “itchy finger” mistakes less likely. You can compose your angry messages in a Word document—that means that you don’t have to worry about a slip of the finger near the Send key. Or you can write your hostile email and then address it only after you are done and are sure you want it to go out. Or, better yet, you can get up from your desk, breathe deeply, and take a walk around the block.

If the email that you are sending is vague, unreasonable, or unnecessary—then it’s an email that shouldn’t be sent.

DON’T EMAIL WHEN YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

This sounds so obvious, but much of the workday is taken up figuring out what on earth we are supposed to do in answer to an email we’ve received. The confusion could come from an inherently unclear email. Or it could be that we’ve been sent an email, and we think we are just being told something as an FYI, but also suspect we might be expected to act on the information but aren’t really sure. Or it could be that the person emailing us is herself unsure what she wants us to do or not do.

Again, you can’t do much about the emails you receive. But simply asking yourself, “What do I want and am I being clear?” isn’t a bad thing to do before you hit “Send.” And if you want bonus points,

you can ask yourself “Do I really need the thing I’m requesting in this email? Do I have the right to ask for it? Have I made clear the date by which I need it? How will I know if it gets done or not?”

If the email that you are sending is vague, unreasonable, or unnecessary—then it’s an email that shouldn’t be sent.

DON’T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE STALLING

Remember that childhood and childish game where you had to answer every question with another question. “Where are we going?” “Why do you want to know?” “Who do you mean by you?” “What do you mean when you ask me what I mean by you.” So goes email.

We have one friend who waits until hours before a deadline, and then sends you an email asking one more question about the project, thereby eliminating the need (in his mind and on the record) for him to complete the task until you answer his email.

Infuriating.

DON’T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE DRUNK

Very dangerous. Very. It’s the younger, more tech-savvy sibling of drunk-dialing. A few beers into the evening and it may seem like a great idea to call your first love from high school and catch up. A few beers into the evening it may seem like a great idea to email your boss and let her know what you really think of the reorganization plan.

It isn’t.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE GOSSIPING

There's a wonderful quote from a play by George Bernard Shaw. One character says something horribly gossipy and then adds a sentence more or less like the following, "If you quote me, I'll simply deny it." Not possible on email. Unless you want to pretend that you've been hacked, or that you left your Blackberry briefly unattended in a public place when you went to the restroom and someone sent the message as a prank. No one believes either tale, by the way.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU SEE THE "RE'S" PILE UP

A mathematician friend told us that if ten people are emailing one another to try to decide among four restaurants, then you could have one million emails before you all decided on the restaurant. (That calculation assumes that the order in which people express their opinions could influence the way the discussion proceeds—which is quite true to life).

When people use email to try to reach agreement and then start to flounder, email goes from being the great time-saver to the great time-suck. Part of the problem is that people get out of sync, and respond to one part of a thread long after the thread has moved on. Another part of the problem is human nature. We are beings who love to complicate.

Whatever the cause of these endless email discussions, they are wildly unproductive. When you've gone several rounds, it's time to stop emailing and pick up the phone.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU HAVE NOTHING TO ADD

Are you adding to the conversation or just making your voice heard? In school football games, long after the tackle had been made, long after the whistle had been blown, and there was a mound of kids already covering the one kid who at one time held the football, there was always that last kid who felt compelled to take a flying leap and jump on top of the human pile. Don't be that kid.

And when people write at the bottom of their emails "No Reply Necessary," they are probably meaning, in a polite way, something a bit stronger: "Please Don't Reply."

DON'T EMAIL WHEN THE EXCHANGE IS OVER

How do you know an exchange is over? When the conversation has devolved into one-word replies, then it's finished. "Done." "Great." "Perfect." "Terrific." "Thanks." "Okay." All of these mean: "Over and Out."

Another test? When there's absolutely no way that any misunderstanding could occur. You send a message that says, "So, we will meet at the big clock at Grand Central Station at 4pm on Tuesday, May 12. I have your cell number. My cell number is below if there are any problems." You get a message back that says, "Terrific. We are all set. I'll see you there." If the plan is totally clear, and both parties have confirmed it already, that means that you are indeed all set. Resist the urge to email back.

DON'T EMAIL AT 3AM

You can compose emails to your heart's content at 3am. But don't send them. This sounds like a little thing, but it's not. Part of the reason we are all becoming 24/7 serfs is that we are all bombarding each other 24/7. If you are an insomniac, there's a chance your correspondents are, too. (Birds of a feather...). And if you compulsively check email night and day and night, they may be checking at all those times, too. So the email you write at 3am has a shot at being read at 3am. Email grew up in a 9-5 office/desktop world, but it has come of age in a laptop/Blackberry/home-computer one, a world that operates around the clock.

Laying off the crack-of-dawn emailing is particularly important if you are the boss. Give your staff a rest. You might not realize it, but your workers may actually be up and reading your overnight missives, and then missing sleep as a result. An email doesn't just keep its recipient up for the seconds it takes to read the email; it can keep someone up worrying, especially if it conveys troubling or demanding or aggravating information, or is preemptory or abrupt.

Sure, there are productivity experts who advise people only to check their email a certain number of times a day or week, and only in certain situations. And we are all for this—if you are very secure in your job, don't have an addictive personality, and have a career where this is acceptable. But many of us aren't, do, and don't. So we need to think of ourselves like dieters. We know we shouldn't snack from the giant chip bag all day and all night. And we are trying to cut down, we really are. But we need to help each other. And that starts with not putting chips in one another's faces all night long.

We can all continue to write emails at 3am. And on the weekends. And on public and religious holidays. But we can also all "save as draft" the late-night emails we compose, or even program them to send themselves at a decent hour, so that no matter when we write our emails, they are received no earlier than 9 the next morning.

One complication, of course, is time zones. Our 9am is another person's 3am. And you don't always know where everyone is. So we probably won't get it right all the time. But we can try. It's one of those not-big things that can make a big difference in our lives.

Bored emailing quickly gives birth to urgent emailing. The simple fix? Carry a book. And make sure your iPod is fully charged.

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU ARE BORED

We see them everywhere: the people emailing on their handhelds at the Cineplex before the movie begins; emailing on the bus; emailing in the airport lounge; emailing at the park; emailing while being stood-up at a restaurant; emailing between innings at the ballgame. Always emailing. Often, these folk are catching up on important business and making good use of downtime. More often, these folks are simply bored and are firing off emails to fill the time. But the problem with emailing when you are bored is you send emails you don't really need to send (see above). And then you get emails back in response. And then you do find yourself having to use every spare second to answer those. So it's a vicious cycle and then some. Bored emailing quickly gives birth to urgent emailing.

The simple fix? Carry a book. And make sure your iPod is fully charged. That way, you will be far less likely to use your BlackBerry as if it were a GameBoy.

And if you happen to share downtime with another human being—well, then, you can always talk. Who knows what you might learn?

DON'T EMAIL WHEN YOU SHOULD BE CONCENTRATING OR PAYING ATTENTION TO SOMEONE OR SOMETHING ELSE

Will has a classic office set up. His desk faces the door. His chair is behind his desk. His credenza is behind his chair. His computer is on his credenza. This means that when he's emailing, his back is to the door. Sometimes colleagues come in and they talk to his back while he's emailing. He could say, "This isn't a great time; can we meet in fifteen?" Or he could stop emailing and turn around and talk. But, no. Way too often, he continues to email and to chat simultaneously—so his colleagues wind up talking to his back. Is he proud of this? He is not.

Also not good—emailing when driving, when competing in physical activities (like while downhill skiing), when someone is telling you something that's important to them, at a funeral or Christening or Bar Mitzvah or retirement party or under the table during a meeting or at kid's little league game...

You may think your emails are important, and we're sure some are, but, in the immortal words of the Bible and the Byrds, there's a time for every purpose under heaven. For those around you—well, it just looks like you aren't paying full attention to them or to the task at hand. And you aren't. As far as everyone in the room is concerned, you might as well be doing a crossword puzzle. So that's one way of thinking about it. "Would I do a crossword puzzle during a wedding? While someone was confiding in me his deepest fears and anxieties? At a dinner party?"

If you are at an event and absolutely must check your email, then you can always: Find your way to the bathroom; go into a stall; and check and send from there. The hygiene implications are a bit alarming, sure. But it's a small price to pay for not offending those you like and love.

DOES THIS REALLY MATTER?

You could say that email is just email, like an envelope is just an envelope. Does it really matter if we get a dozen envelopes a day or a few? And so what if some of them contain things that shouldn't have been sent? Who cares?

But email isn't just an envelope. It's the envelope and the letter inside. It's the dancer and the dance. To pile on the metaphors, it's not just a vehicle for an ongoing dialogue between two or more individuals, but also the freight the vehicle carries.

Email needs people. And that's where it gets great and where it gets tricky.

An email doesn't exist in a vacuum. Sure, email is sent by one solitary soul, but it has no life until it's received by a second person. Without both a receiver and a sender, there is no email. Email needs people. And that's where it gets great and where it gets tricky.

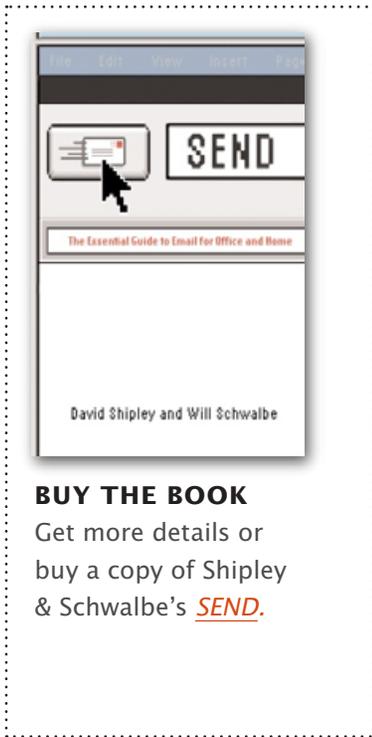
Any time you have interaction between people, there's opportunity and danger. All communication, even the most trivial, has the power to do one of three things: Bring people closer together; Maintain the status quo; or, Drive those involved further apart. Any single email could be the catalyst for cementing a relationship or for destroying it. And the emails that cause the worst ruptures are often not the emails that were badly written, but the emails that should never have been sent. Maybe, in one case, it's the furious screed that does the damage—the email you wouldn't have sent if you had given yourself a few more hours to cool off. But maybe, in another, it's a “straw that breaks the

camel's back" email, the one-reply-too-many that causes a potential ally and friend to begin to regard you as a bother and a pest.

If you get and send 100 emails a day, that adds up to more than 30,000 a year even allowing for downtime, holidays, and less email traffic on weekends. At 200, you are well over 60,000 a year.

If everyone didn't send emails that didn't need to be sent, how low could we get that number? How much less aggravating would we make our days? How many relationships would be preserved and strengthened and not destroyed? How much easier would it be to find and focus on important emails or on other matters at hand? How much more effective would our own less frequent emails be? How much more time would we have to spend doing things we love with people we love?

It's worth finding out.



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