

Of all the technological marvels that have changed the way we do business, nothing quite compares to email. But like all productivity tools, it comes with risks that can turn a blessing into a curse. They fall into two primary categories – what comes in and what goes out – both of which require a level of awareness and diligence to keep trouble at bay.

The Trouble with EMAIL

An Employer's View of Email

Employers have a significant investment in their computer-based information network. Every computer becomes a window in and out of the company, which means risk flows in both directions. The most concerned companies may have policies with no gray area – absolutely no personal emails at work. Violation can be cause for discipline.

The Risks of Incoming Email

The primary risk of email from unknown sources is the potential for computer viruses. Viruses are destructive codes that can erode or even destroy the receiving computer and the network it attaches to. Most companies have safeguards in place, including spam filters that stop

unsolicited sales messages. And they stay on top of the ever-changing landscape of virus protection. But still, they rely on employees to help guard against data intrusions.

If you do receive an email from an unknown source, be careful before you open it. Turn off the “preview” option, which automatically opens your email and may allow attached viruses to enter the system. If there is an attachment – the primary method of delivering viruses – make sure you know ahead of time that it’s coming. A “heads-up” message is all it takes. When in doubt, delete the email before opening.

The Risks of Outgoing Email

Personal emails devour time and attention.

Whether it’s the latest joke, politics, or YouTube, diverting your attention from the job cost your company big bucks. Some companies refer to this as “time theft.” It’s no different than walking out on the job. The best rule of thumb is to simply not engage in any personal emailing at work. If your family needs to reach you, have them call you instead.

How and What You Say

Another email risk is the chance that someone will misinterpret your intended message or that you may write impulsively. Careers and relationships have been damaged by misworded or emotional email sent without considering the consequences. Consider saving an email and re-reading it later, if possible. Chances are that you will change it.

Avoid all caps because they are interpreted as shouting. Using sarcasm in emails almost always flops and fails to communicate well. So, be literal. It’s safer. Short, fragment messages can be interpreted as cold and harsh.

Remember, once you click send, you can never get it back. It’s somewhere on the network with your name on it. Even if deleted by your receiver, e-mail can be remain on an Internet e-mail service provider’s server for years. Bill Gates, while giving testimony in the U.S. Congress in the 1990’s, was asked to respond to emails he wrote *and had deleted five years earlier!*

The best approach to e-mail is to play it straight and by the rules – no personal emails, no opening of unsolicited emails from unknown sources, and taking the time to make your emails clear with the meaning you intend to convey.

