Beyond Technical Training

More Effective E-Mail

By Raymond P. Ward

Each day, the average lawyer probably reads and writes dozens of e-mail messages. Yet, while many of us received technical training in reading and writing e-mail, few of us have any training in making our e-mail messages more effective. Here are a few tips to fill that gap in our training.

The Subject Line

The subject line of your e-mail should differentiate the e-mail from all of the others, making it easier for your recipient to find six months or a year after you send it. Most e-mail subject lines are too general to fulfill this purpose. For example, a subject line like “Smith v. Jones” fails to distinguish the e-mail from the several e-mails you may send or receive in one day about that case—or from the hundreds you may send or accumulate about that case over several months or years.

So don’t think of the subject line as the equivalent of the Re line in a letter. Instead, think of it as the equivalent of a newspaper headline. If copy editors nationwide can sum up a news story in three to seven words, then we should be able to sum up our e-mail message in a pithy subject line, such as the following:

• Smith v. Jones—draft answer attached for your review.
• Smith v. Jones—settlement offer.
• Smith v. Jones—mediation scheduled for Oct. 10.

If you forward or reply to an e-mail with a vague subject line like “Smith v. Jones,” edit the subject line before sending to make it more informative. If you receive an e-mail from opposing counsel with the subject “Smith v. Jones,” requesting consent to an extension, edit the subject line before sending your reply: “Smith v. Jones—no objection to extension.”

Most e-mail programs don’t allow you to edit the subject line of an incoming message. If you store your incoming messages and want your subject lines to be informative, forward the message to yourself, and before clicking on Send, edit the subject line to your liking.

The Body

All of us should know by now that an e-mail, once stored anywhere, lives forever. The delete button gets it out of our in-box but does not get it out of the system. So never write anything in an e-mail that will embarrass you if unearthed in discovery.

We should also know that if we work for a law firm, the law firm owns the e-mail system. So never write anything in an e-mail message that will embarrass you if read by firm management.

Those are the don’ts. Here is the do: In your first sentence, get to the point. State the purpose of your e-mail or the request you are making of the reader in the first sentence. Business-writing instructor Lynn Gaertner-Johnson explains why: “Email readers do not want to read the ‘historical information or the why behind an email’ before they learn the purpose or request. They want the purpose or the request first. Then they may want the why. They rarely want the historical information.” Lynn Gaertner-Johnson, Business Writing, http://www.businesswritingblog.com (Apr. 8, 2008).

The Look

Many e-mail programs use Arial or Times New Roman as the default font. While those fonts are adequate, your computer probably provides you with two better choices: Georgia (a serif font) and Verdana (a sans serif font). These two fonts were designed specifically for on-screen reading, making them ideal for e-mail. And unlike newer fonts designed for on-screen reading, they are included as the default font. While those fonts are adequate, your computer probably provides you with two better choices: Georgia (a serif font) and Verdana (a sans serif font). These two fonts were designed specifically for on-screen reading, making them ideal for e-mail. And unlike newer fonts designed for on-screen reading, they are included as the default font.

The Accidental E-Mail

Have you ever received half-written e-mail, followed shortly by another saying, “Oops, please disregard the previous e-mail”? Here are two tips from Gaertner-Johnson to help you avoid accidentally sending any e-mail before its time.

When composing an e-mail, do not fill in the To line until after you have completed the body of the message and attached any attachments. Id. (Jan. 26, 2006).

When replying to or forwarding an e-mail, first, type some gibberish on the Cc line. Do not remove the gibberish until your reply is ready to be sent. If you accidentally hit the Send button prematurely, the gibberish on the Cc line should prevent the e-mail program from sending the reply. Id. (June 8, 2006).

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As a general rule, when replying to e-mail, reply to the sender only. Don’t reply to all unless you’re certain that everyone must read your reply.

To discourage *Reply to all* abuse, put the recipients’ e-mail addresses on the *Bcc* line, and your own e-mail address on the *To* line. That way, the only recipients of a *Reply to all* will be the replier and you.

**Close**

Most e-mail programs allow you to create a signature block for automatic insertion at the end of each outgoing e-mail. Use this feature. Make sure that your signature block includes all your contact information, including snail-mail and e-mail addresses, phone and fax numbers, and your e-mail address. If you believe in self-promotion—and what lawyer doesn’t—include a link to your website or your bio page on your firm’s website.