How to think outside the inbox

Written by: Sue Welman,
Executive Coach and Director

29 November 2017

Miscommunication is the mother of all screw-ups in the business world. A wrongly worded email, for example, can instantly infuriate or confuse your team.

How to communicate clearly via email:

Know your audience:

Sue Welman, an executive coach at the Johannesburg-based Nabantu partners, says there are basically three types of email recipients you need to cater for:

Analytical types.

They require detailed information about an issue before they can form an assessment. Your emails should give in-depth analysis and as much detail as possible. These readers respond well to a structured argument.

High-level thinkers.

On a good day, they'll read the first two lines of your long and well-crafted email. They'll quickly scan the paragraphs, and often will send you a mail back asking a lot of questions (that are actually addressed in your mail, if they would just read the damn thing in full). For these co-workers, keep it concise and list all information in bullet point format, with the most important facts listed first.

People-orientated individuals.

Don't send them a mail. First pick up a phone, or walk over and talk to them. Follow it up with an email, if absolutely necessary. This group values connection.

A particular challenge comes in when you have to write an email to a group of people with different personality types. Welman recommends a combined strategy: sending a succinct mail with the facts or action items listed in bullet point format, but adding the detailed information as an attachment.

Also, follow up your mail with a call or interaction with those who are people-focused. "As our lives evolve more and more amid the digital revolution, now more than ever the personal connection will count," says Welman.

A conversation is worth a thousand mails. If something is unclear to you, and you want to ask a few questions, consider using this neglected piece of highly efficient technology: verbal communication. This is particularly effective in sensitive situations.

Make your point early:
Start off with the most important information.

Count your words:
Keep your messages short and use strong verbs. Add deadlines to all tasks, if possible.

Subject lines should stay on topic:
Convey as much information as you can. For example, don't write "Help needed" in the subject line – instead, be more specific: "Your feedback required on new contract". Also, when you forward an email, replace the previous subject line to reflect the current points under discussion.

Don't try to be cute:
Using shortcut words like "K" (How long does it really take to write that extra O?) and "ta", or emojis, can irritate the reader. Also, steer clear of nicknames – especially those of your own creation.

Turn on the spell checker:
And your language and grammar checker to.

Name and shame:
Don't embarrass yourself by getting the name (or worse, the gender) of the person you are emailing wrong. Don't make assumptions and double check spelling.

Don't try to rally the troops:
Email is a channel for creating awareness and sharing information – it is not for eliciting commitment, says Welman. "The success rate for using email to create engagement is not high." Human interaction is required to really motivate your team members.

Think carefully about salutations:
Some experts think that "Hi" coupled with a name or title and surname ("Hi Mr Nkosi") is a good option. "Dear Sir" is increasingly seen as too formal.

Me, myself and I:
Email etiquette demands a healthy interest in what the recipient thinks – avoid overusing references to "me", "I" and "in my opinion".

Don't blind copy:
Increasingly, using the BCC function is frowned upon.

This article originally appeared in the 26 May 2016 edition of finweek. You can buy and download the magazine on the site.