

## #DAY4LOCKDOWNSA

### EMAIL ETIQUETTE:

#### Guidelines for increased use during the lockdown period

by

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Who would have thought it would take a minuscule but vicious virus to inspire South Africans to begin to see themselves and start acting as a people? Prof Thuli Madonsela

Over the last three decades email has become the main channel of business communication at most organisations. Now during the national lockdown caused by the corona virus pandemic, email will be used more than before, given the fact that many people working at essential service offices will avoid face-to-face contact where possible, while the increased number of remote workers will use email as their main source of communication. While this is unavoidable, and notwithstanding the need for more frequent email communication, there are also several risks for organisations, managers and employees to consider. Some of the most common risks are as follows:

- Many people will receive more emails than before, and may not be able to cope with the increase email traffic;
- During periods of increased levels of uncertainty, stress, ambiguity, panic and anxiety more irrational and unprofessional emails will be send and distributed;
- The unprofessional use of email may lead to increased risks for employers, and could result in more grievances and disciplinary cases;
- Incidents of cyber security risks are expected to increase;
- Conflict may increase as a result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of emails when this communication replaces face-to-face interactions or meetings;
- More fake news and false information will be distributed.

However, most managers and employees have not been trained on the professional use of email communication, resulting in the ineffective use of email in the workplace. During this period of intense stress and panic, it is important to remain calm and behave professionally when using email more frequently. Hence the need for email etiquette as a clear guideline on how to use email and how not to use it, not only during this period of the corona pandemic, but also in future. The reality is that during this period of chaos, more things can go wrong, and often companies are found wanting when they realise weaknesses in policy and behaviour.

The following guidelines are useful as practical tips for effective email communication.

*Rule 1: If you can communicate the message in other ways, don't use email.* Don't send an email if you can phone a person, send an SMS or use another communication channel. Remember phones and even smart phones were invented as phones first, and their main and original purpose is to make phone calls. There is nothing more frustrating for email users to have more than half of their inboxes

full of irrelevant emails or spam. The vast majority of emails are unnecessary and wasting the time of both senders and receivers. If you don't believe me, go through the last 20 emails in your inbox, and count the number of ones that were really useful to you.

*Rule 2: Respect boundaries:* Never send emails to people you know who are simply too busy to read more emails. Think about this – every email you send adds to the workload of the next person. Even if the person only reads the message and does not respond, you have added some time to his or her work day. Avoid send emails to your CEO or other senior managers, unless if it is really essential or if s/he asks you to do so. Most CEOs already have a 14-17 hour work day, and you are extending this long work day of this person if you waste his or her time with more emails. Also bear in mind that CEOs already have thousands of emails in their inboxes, your matter is simply not a priority for an overworked senior or top manager, unless if you need help or guidance to proceed with your work. Rather send your message to the PA of the CEO who are often in better position to deal with the issue to channel it to the right person for follow-up. Also bear in mind that your CEO is now the person experiencing the most stress during the lockdown. The CEO worries about the survival of your company, the payment of suppliers and staff, and many other unanswered questions during the lockdown, let alone the safety of his or her own family during this crisis.

*Rule 3: Have a clear subject line:* Keep your subject line short, clear and focused on the topic so that it adequately describes the issue. This will also help when old emails need to be retrieved. If a person sends you an email with an inadequate subject line, insert the correct one in your response, this will not only educate and help the receiver, it will build your own brand as a professional communicator.

*Rule 4: Don't copy dozens of people:* Only copy the one, or two or more people who really need to be informed about the issue. The whole world does not need to be informed about every little issue affecting you. In addition, rather use blind copy for multiple email addresses so that the privacy of the party is protected and that email addresses are not distributed in the open market. Use bulk email when really necessary and in a professional way to communicate essential information only.

*Rule 5: Be professional:* Use professional generally accepted business language and avoid slang or abbreviations. Double-check your email for accuracy, spelling, language and professionalism before you press send. Your email message represents your personal and company brand and protecting your reputation is of utmost importance. Therefore, if you use a work email address, don't communicate with friends and family members via your work email. Offensive, rude, derogatory and abusive language should never be used in email (or other) communication.

*Rule 6: Provide the right amount of information:* Balance being detailed and being to the point. Communicate what you have to say in a clear, comprehensive, yet succinct way. Keep messages as short as possible, but don't leave out key information that will prompt the receiver to ask many questions. The clearer your message, the less chance that you will have continuous up and down communication. Email communication is not supposed to regress into an ongoing question and answer session taking too much of the senders' and receivers' time. Rather use Microsoft Teams or other collaborative tools for this purpose.

*Rule 7: Don't reply to all:* Never reply to all, unless if instructed to do so in an emergency situation by a senior manager or very important project leader requiring a reply. It is not necessary to say "thank you" or "noted" for every single message you receive.

*Rule 8: Don't use ALL CAPS:* In Internet language ALL CAPS messages mean that the person is shouting at you. Similarly, avoid any exclamation marks (!). This is also seen as shouting.

*Rule 9: Avoid humour and sarcasm:* When communicating with people who are not close personal friends, don't use humour or sarcasm that could be interpreted differently by different people. Remember that an email receiver can not see your face, smile or body language and may therefore not realise that you are joking.

*Rule 10: Don't respond on the same day if you are upset:* If you are upset about an email message, do not respond the same day. Think it through and you will notice that your response will be more professional and balanced the next day. Also, don't use email for dealing with conflict or sensitive situations, rather arrange face-to-face, skype or teleconferences for dealing with sensitive or conflict matters.

*Rule 11: Keep emails formal:* Emails constitute a formal record of your communication. Sometimes you simply communicate your feelings or well-intended information to other people. Always remember that if things go wrong in future, this message may be used against you, especially if you consider that it is a formal record of communication about a sensitive or legal issue at hand. Furthermore, consider the reputational damage if your message is forwarded to other people who may use it against you in future.

*Rule 12: Don't forward emails to other people:* The general rule is to only forward emails if it is absolutely necessary for another party to receive the message as essential information to take action. And of course, don't get involved in chain letters, fake news or any form of spam.

*Rule 13: Create a personal account for personal stuff:* Never use a formal organisational email platform for personal emails. Create a separate gmail or other private email account for personal emails and tell your friends and family members to use your private address and not your business address.

*Rule 14: Self-manage your email time:* Schedule specific times during the day to answer emails so that you can manage it in a focused way. If you create the impression that you are "always on" ready to answer emails at any time, people will expect you to answer immediately. Prioritising urgent, important, and less important responses is a skill you need to develop to self-manage your email communication.

*Rule 15: Design a professional signature box:* A professional signature box specifying all your contact details, including phone numbers is not only a sign of professionalism, but also adds to your personal and/or company brand. A job title makes it clear who you are and provides a clue about the type of communication that may be relevant or irrelevant to you. This facilitates effective communication and helps to channel the right message to the right person who may be in a better position to answer. Tony Snapshak says in *Financial Mail* that you should be aware that an image designed on a laptop will be too wide for a smart phone screen and the text will be too small to read.

*Rule 16: Respect diversity:* Like other forms of communication, also realise that your emails reach people from diverse backgrounds. Respect this diversity and do not assume that other people think or behave like you. Thus, like in any other office or professional environment, rather avoiding extensive political, religious and other cultural discussions. Alternatively, such matters should be handled with sensitivity and respect. These type of discussions can really go wrong via email when body language and face-to-face interactions cannot be observed and responded to.

*Rule 17: Limit the size of your message:* Limit the size and number of attachments. Many companies impose limitations in terms of size and this means that messages may not even reach the intended receiver. It is possible to copy text directly into the body of the email. Tony Snapshak warns strongly

against large image files of several megabytes because they shred data bundles. Rather use Dropbox or Wetransfer or other similar platforms for large files.

*Rule 18: Keep it short and simple:* Most people do not want to read a 20+ line email message. Keep it short, simple and focused highlighting essential information, but the over-use of italics, colour, emojis and bold text is inappropriate and unprofessional.

*Rule 19: Be aware of cyber criminals:* South Africa is one of the top five countries in the world attracting cyber criminals. Do not click on any requests for updating your ID or bank details, if you are not 100% sure that the source is authentic. The general rule is to assume that these messages are fake and intended to commit cyber crime.

*Rule 20: Apply the law, policies and codes:* While it is indeed essential to conform to general principles of netetiquette as outlined above, bear in mind that there are several pieces of legislation governing the appropriate use of electronic communication, such as the Electronic Communications Act, as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act. Personal and data security underpins these laws and compliance is therefore important. The restriction on the distribution of fake news pertaining to the corona virus pandemic is now official government policy and therefore illegal. You can now be arrested for spreading fake news. Moreover, many companies have email and other electronic communication, social media and IT governance policies and guidelines. Make sure that you understand these policies and comply with it. In addition, the inappropriate and unprofessional use of email communication may violate the professional code of conduct of professionals such as IT professionals, engineers, accountants, psychologists and HR professionals who are expected to always behave professionally, including when using email platforms. In fact, professionals are reminded that any unprofessional communication on email or social media goes viral in seconds and could therefore pose significant personal and reputational risk to professionals and their employers. In worse case scenarios, these professionals may even lose their professional registration and their jobs if dismissed by their employers.

The above “rules” are not intended to regulate email communication during this difficult time for all of us during the lockdown, but rather to serve as general conventions or guidelines to ensure the effective use of email as a tool for business communication going forward. Applying these guidelines will promote a more professional way of using and leveraging the use of email at work and at remote locations, especially in the light of the sharp increase in remote working from last week.

Email is a great tool for business continuity and employee communication and it makes all of us virtual workers in an increased flexible work environment. Working from home is a protective measure over the short-term, but we must remind ourselves, that we are still working and we therefore need to maintain our professionalism when using email communication to stay connected with customers and colleagues. Having said that, employers should also realise that people will express their fears, anxiety and panic over email during this difficult period. Be sensitive towards such employees, customers and suppliers. While COVID-19 makes us all vulnerable from a health perspective, let us not lose our professionalism and reputation in the process. Let us use email professionally for the benefit of all our stakeholders, while limiting risks, frustrations and unprofessional use.

*Marius Meyer is a Lecturer in Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). This article was inspired by Tony Snapshak of Stuff Magazine and expands on some of his views published in Financial Mail on 7 February 2018. The inputs and review by Tony Parry, CEO of the IT Professionals Association are also acknowledged. A previous version of this article was published in HR Voice. This article was published by SABPP on 30 March 2020, see [www.sabpp.co.za](http://www.sabpp.co.za)*