E-Mail Editing Explained: Ensure Your Message Isn't Missed

Your e-mails can do more harm than good if you don't edit them the right way.

By Julie Miller

It was supposed to be a joke. Frank loved to joke with people, but he usually stayed away from injecting humor into his writing, especially at work. Today was different: He thought the team could use a chuckle. So, at the end of an important e-mail to his team, he added one more sentence:

"We're going to have a contest this month, and the winners will have the honor of continuing to work with me!" It was an afterthought that popped into his mind as he was re-reading his e-mail. It would be an edit he wished he hadn't made.

Molly read the e-mail and nervously pinged her colleague Nancy. "What do you think Frank meant by that sentence at the end of the e-mail? Do you think he's going to cut jobs?"

Nancy was curious now too. She forwarded the e-mail string to her co-worker Brenda, adding her query.

Brenda had another take. After analyzing Frank's confusing comment, she was convinced he was leaving the organization. To quell her curiosity, she forwarded the e-mail string to Lou.

The confusion ended after Lou ventured into Frank's office to gain clarity. He told Frank that many on the team were talking about "the comment."

Frank was surprised at the misunderstanding. He regretted adding that clever comment to his e-mail – words that were only added while editing his original message. Frank was astonished that one meaningless sentence had captured his team's imagination, causing them to miss the relevant message he intended to deliver.

Make sure your message isn't missed. Here are three tips for editing your e-mail messages before sending:

1. Subtract, Don't Add

When reviewing your e-mail message before you send it, focus on deleting any unnecessary verbiage. Avoid adding words. Adding colorful commentary or amusing asides

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rarely adds to the information you share via e-mail. On the contrary, it can lead to misunderstanding, confusion, and even anger.

Why This Matters: A recent study found that 64% of people report having either sent or received an e-mail that resulted in unintended anger or confusion. By sticking to facts, you minimize the risk of such adverse reactions. Conciseness is key: Aim to deliver your message in as few words as possible.

2. Be Intentional

When editing your e-mail before sending, be intentional in your use of language. Does your word choice aid the overall aim of the message? This is the time to review and rewrite any sentences that may convey ambiguous or vague meanings.

Why This Matters: Most employees' inboxes are inundated with e-mail daily. Even worse, many of these e-mails don't add value. One study found that 86% of the e-mails we receive are useless. Being intentional about word choice contributes to creating an e-mail that is useful to your reader.

3. Avoid Humor

Levity can reduce stress, lower burnout, and increase engagement in the workplace. In written communication, however, humor can be problematic. Humor happens in the delivery: It depends on your inflection and emphasis. Readers can't hear your delivery. Written communication lacks non-verbal cues to provide the context that's necessary for humor.

Why This Matters: When employees are interrupted at work, it takes them about 23 minutes to get back on task. When you add humor to your e-mail, you risk misinterpretation. When your reader is left to question the intended meaning of your message, it takes more time. Thus, the interruption your e-mail causes can increase exponentially.

Save People Time & Energy

Writing and reading e-mails consume a considerable chunk of time for many employees each day. The average knowledge worker spends 28% of the day responding to e-mail. That amount of time increases when the message is confusing or ambiguous.

By following these tips, you can save your readers time and increase the likelihood that your intended message is delivered. Not to mention minimizing adverse reactions – assuming you want people to like you more, not less. 💲

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