

A guide for sending and receiving e-mails

1. Introduction

The University is committed to providing a safe and healthy working environment for its staff and recognises the importance of fostering psychological as well as physical well-being. The University acknowledges that for some staff, managing a high volume of e-mails can be a source of stress. Some may use hand held devices to manage e-mails and others may choose alternative work practices.

Most posts at the University require staff to send and receive e-mails as part of their working day during normal working hours. This should always be done in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice which requires staff and students to use email appropriately and carefully to ensure that messages do not give offence, either in tone or content. There is no formal expectation that staff should read or reply to e-mails outside of their normal working hours; however the University accepts that staff may choose to do this if they wish. Everyone manages their time in different ways and staff are encouraged to take regular breaks from work.

This guidance is intended to enhance the "Rules for the Use of University Computers and Data Networks" and does not replace them.

2. Sending e-mails

When sending e-mails, there are a number of points to consider which may help those that receive the e-mails:

Do you need to send an e-mail at all?

You should always consider whether or not sending an e-mail is the most appropriate form of communication. Could you go and talk to people face-to-face or pick up the phone instead? If responding via e-mail is appropriate, you should always take a moment to consider your use of the "cc" and "reply all" buttons. Is it necessary to copy lots of others in or reply to everyone that was included in the original e-mail?

Is the message content appropriate for the audience?

Think about who you are sending the e-mail to and how it will be received. It is worth remembering that many of the subtleties of other communication styles are not possible using e-mail and this can lead to misunderstandings etc. Consider who it is appropriate to copy the message to (if anyone at all). You should always read an e-mail through carefully before pressing the "send" button. You should also consider 'e-mail trails'; Can some of the trail be cut down or summarised in the email you are sending instead of 'please see email trail'? Is there something sensitive in the trail that could be misinterpreted or that should not be copied to some people?

Is the message short and simple?

An e-mail that is polite, concise and to the point is more likely to be well received and actioned than a long rambling e-mail where it is not clear what information or response is required. Where information can be summarised in bullet points or lists or a few sentences it helps.

Should it be marked confidential?

Consider whether or not an e-mail should be marked confidential. Some senior staff give their PAs permission to read and reply to their e-mails, unless it is marked confidential.

Do you expect a response?

You should make this clear in your e-mail and be clear about when you would like a response by. You should not unreasonably expect a response from colleagues outside of their normal working hours.

3. Receiving and replying to e-mails

When receiving and replying to e-mails, there are also a number of points to consider:

Do you need to reply at all?

You should always consider whether or not you need to reply to messages and whether or not sending an e-mail is the most appropriate form of communication. Could you go and talk to people face-to-face or pick up the phone instead?

Do you need to respond straight away?

Consider whether or not you should respond straight away. Staff are not normally expected to respond to e-mails outside of their normal working hours. If you cannot reply straight away then perhaps send a holding response until you can reply more fully. You may wish to use an “out of office” message to inform people that you read e-mails once or twice a day and not to expect an immediate reply, but you should also inform them how to get hold of you or who to contact if their query is urgent. If an ‘unpleasant’ email is received, it may be best not to reply straight away or even at all. If you are replying to a difficult email, perhaps get a colleague to read it through first to check your tone. If you are very concerned about the tone or content of an e-mail that you have received you should talk to your line manager or HR Partner/Adviser.

Do you need to copy lots of people in to the e-mails?

Consider whether or not it’s appropriate to copy lots of people in to your reply. This may mean taking out people who were originally copied in to the first e-mail.

Can you close down your inbox and have a break from your e-mails?

Where possible, you should try to give yourself a regular break from your e-mails, particularly if your role is desk based.

4. What should you do if you feel stressed?

Anyone can suffer from work-related stress, no matter what work they do. There is detailed guidance on Preventing and Managing Work-related Stress available to both managers and employees on the HR website: www.reading.ac.uk/hr and further information on the Supporting You website: www.reading.ac.uk/supportingyou.

There are a number of in-house sessions provided by CSTD that cover aspects of stress management:

- Supporting You: Managing your e-mails
- Supporting You: Avoiding Burnout
- Assertive communication skills
- Time Management
- Introduction to using Outlook
- Outlook 2010 Hints and Tips

An Outlook 2010 Hints & Tips Guide: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/its/Outlook2010Tips.pdf>