

# E-mail – Complete Chaos?

Does your organisation have an e-mail policy? It probably should. This article is the first in a mini series outlining the main areas for consideration when reviewing your organisations use of e-mail, forming an e-mail policy and conducting training.

In this part we look at legal considerations and highlight the poor or inappropriate usage of e-mail in typical organisations.

Although the e-mail software used in your company may be very easy and just about irresistibly convenient to use at a basic level, the absence of proper training and a usage and management policy can cause time and knowledge to be wasted, cause stress and conflict, cost money and result in legal problems.

AIIM ([www.aiim.org.uk](http://www.aiim.org.uk)), the global enterprise content management association, is currently conducting a survey, the results of which according to

Doug Miles of AIIM Europe ([www.aiim.org.uk](http://www.aiim.org.uk) - the global enterprise content management association), posted on a British Computer Society message board that "20% of respondents consider their company's control of e-mails to be complete chaos". We guess that a significant proportion of the remaining respondents would consider their e-mail control to be at best "less than ideal".

## The Law

This area relating to e-mails and other electronic communication such as instant messaging is a book, even a library, in itself. Put briefly an e-mail is seen more and more as a legally significant object and therefore needs to be handled with care!

A widely quoted case is that of Norwich Union in 1999 who was forced into an out of court settlement for £450,000 when it was alleged that e-mails sent by its staff defamed its competitor Western Provident Association. The matter was made worse for Norwich Union as e-mails sent by Norwich Union staff had been deleted. Apparently the matter came to light via the actions of a disgruntled member of staff. Type "norwich union e-mail 450,000" into your internet search engine and you will be presented with many other examples of why – if for legal reasons only – you need to review your organisations policies towards e-mail.

Interestingly, an increasing number of organisations are now taking a catch all approach, which they believe will help them to help avoid legal problems, and are saving every single e-mail they create or receive – forever.



According to AIIM in Europe there are three key reviews which an organisation should undertake:

- Data Protection Act
- ISO17799 – Information Security
- BIP0008 – Code of Practice for Legal Admissibility of Information Stored Electronically

In addition to these, depending on your organisations activities, Sarbanes-Oxley (a US act which may apply to European companies if they have US interests) and SEC rule 17a-4 (another US regulation targeting the financial markets) may also need to be reviewed.

The legal area relating to e-mails is a complex one and care should be taken not to over or under react – what might be essential for one organisation’s operation may be expensive and totally unnecessary for another. Make sure you receive good independent advice – remember there is a lot of money to be made selling hardware and software relating to e-mail management.

## **E-mail Bad Practice**

E-mail is an incredibly useful form of communication and of the management of knowledge, but it is also routinely misused. You may argue with some of these activities being labelled as “misuse”, but we believe that in the vast majority of examples that label fits.

In 2003 the Phones 4U boss John Caudwell notoriously banned staff from using e-mail for just the reasons we outline below. He urged employees to talk face to face or on the phone instead. Caudwell claimed in a statement that after banning e-mail “the quality and efficiency of communication have been increased tremendously in one fell swoop”. Note however - just to prove that e-mail is a useful tool in the right circumstances you can still e-mail Phone4U from their website and it is rumoured - but we have been unable to confirm - that Fridays are exempt from the ban.

Listed here are just some outcomes of e-mail misuse – how many have you experience of? How many are you guilty of...? – and some solutions.

### **OUTCOME: Overloaded In-boxes:**

Did you realise pyramid schemes are rife in many large organisations? Leading to enormous uncontrollable in-boxes and vast amount of time dealing with e-mails not directly related to your priorities.

This is how it works: someone sends an e-mail (at it’s most deadly one which asks an open question) and copies it to, well, the world and his/her mother. For their own reasons the world and his/her/mother reply – *to all*, and *a few other people he/she thinks might like to get involved*. Do you see where this is going? The original sender should consider whether this is really the most efficient way to find an answer – what about a meeting or video conference where everyone can discuss the issue together?

### **A few other avoidable causes of overloaded inboxes:**

- Too complex a subject for e-mail leading to many requests and responses for clarification.

**Solution:** Pick up the phone, organise a meeting. Count to ten before replying to an e-mail or forwarding it: you don't have to use e-mail to respond to an e-mail.

- You've subscribed to too many newsletters than you can possibly read and still get some work done.

**Solution:** Pick the most important and unsubscribe the rest (there should always be information on how to do this on the newsletter). Alternatively, set up rules (See **TOP TIP** later) that direct these newsletters to a separate folder in your inbox so they don't get mixed up with everything else.

- You are using your organisations e-mail system to conduct your social life.

Most organisations accept limited personal use but unlike the phone where you can often be easily overheard (and you know the cost of the call can be traced) when you are sat in front of your PC, busily typing away, people assume you are working and you assume no one can track your e-mails (wrongly). All the social e-mails in response stack up in your inbox amongst the important work related ones.

**Solution:** Use your private address for socialising outside work. Do not encourage (by sending and replying) social e-mails from colleagues in house; many organisations now collect all e-mails for at least a limited time and it is possible an unguarded remark on one of these e-mails may get you into trouble.

- You have a spam problem. Everyone has a spam problem (or will once they have the same e-mail address for a while), with unsolicited mail pouring in everyday.

**Solution.** You will never (in the current climate) stop all spam, but there is a lot you can do to reduce it and manage it. This is a big subject but here are a few basic actions you can take:

1. Make sure you or your organisation is using good spam filtering software or services and that they are configured properly.
2. Use a separate e-mail address when you register on websites that may not be 100% secure - you'll have to use your own judgement for this. For instance a company selling on line greetings cards you have never heard of before may not be as secure as the Inland Revenue.
3. Make sure you have a firewall, anti-virus and spyware protection.
4. Read all e-mail carefully and count to ten before responding (in any way) – was the e-mail really from a legitimate source? Responding could trigger more spam (as well as having other security implications).

**TOP TIP:** Set up sub folders under your inbox to, for example, file away e-mails you have dealt with but wish to keep, or, to separate out types of e-mail to review later (e.g. newsletters). There are many ways to do this, one is to right click with your mouse on the "Inbox" folder and



select “New Folder”. The folder structure works very much like that in your “My Documents” area.

To have e-mail from certain sources, or, for example, with a certain subject line be placed as they arrive in a separate folder, create the folder and then create a “Rule” to automatically file the e-mail. One way of creating a rule in MS Outlook is to go to “Tools” on the top menu and select “Rules Wizard”, from there follow the instructions. Don’t be afraid to experiment you can remove the rule at any time.

In a future article we will look at developments around e-mail systems being more intuitive and providing more options for automatic categorisation of e-mails.

## **OUTCOME : Bad Politics.**

**On the record – I told you so...** Ok it might be advisable in some circumstances but attempting as some people do to put everything in writing just in case it might be useful in the future is not a sign of a healthy team spirit!

**BCC** – sending copies to people without the knowledge of the main recipient. Is this ethical? Is it a bit sneaky? BCC does have one legitimate use – if you send a circular (for a very good reason - perhaps to inform many people of a change of address) you should consider that not everyone you send it to wants everyone else to have their e-mail address, by using BCC they will not be able to see details of the other addressees.

**Who’s responsible?** A bit like the pyramid scheme but with added danger. This time our sender just doesn’t CC: everyone, he/she sends the e-mail to several people *as the main recipients*. This really is a situation where a meeting or teleconference must be a better alternative. If the e-mail is a call to action - who is going to carry out the action?

## **OUTCOME: Bad Relations.**

**Shouldn’t have used e-mail:** e-mail can only use text and (in most cases these days) pictures to communicate. It is very useful to quickly pass on simple, short factual messages; after that you can run into trouble.

Just to underline this: according the Ann Gresty of Educom Business Development Ltd, if we can communicate with words, body language and tone, the message gets over in the following way: 55% through our body language, 38% through our tone and *only 7% through the words we use*. So, E-mail is limited in its communication abilities – consider using another method of communication.

**MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction.** All out e-mail war, a never-ending reciprocal strike of reply to reply, with ascending collateral damage. Pick up the phone, pop round!



**Whoops!** Sending an e-mail is almost too easy. Replying even easier. As previously mentioned count to ten before pressing that send button. As well as e-mail perhaps not being the right medium in the first place consider the following:

- Do you have auto spell check on? You won't want to create a bad impression to a customer.
- Your system may auto-fill the recipient's address, for example you typed Al and Alan not Allyson's address came up. Sending the e-mail to the wrong person could be disastrous – information in an attachment you'd rather a customer did not see for example. This situation happens a lot in organisations, perhaps you should consider removing the auto-fill facility.
- Could the contents or tone of this e-mail get my organisation or myself in trouble if it was made public? You will have heard in the news about many well-known people who have stung in this way, but it also happens daily within and between organisations.

**The wrong tone:** e-mail is particularly bad at communicating any information that may have any emotional content for either the sender or receiver, not only because words are only 7% effective, but because tone is so important. It is extremely hard to compose an e-mail with just the right tone on a sensitive subject. If you are tempted count to ten and re-read what you have written – are you sure this e-mail won't cause more problems than it solves? Using emoticons (like :-)) can help but are hardly appropriate for a serious subject.

An e-mail sent with the best intentions can cause accusations of bullying, off handedness and of disrespect. This can affect relations within an organisation as well as with externally – with people such as potential customers and valued suppliers.

## Food for thought.

Here is an e-mail exchange an independent consultant I know had recently:

This enquiry was sent out of the blue to the information e-address on the independent consultants website.

*Hi, we are looking for a consultant on a 6 to 12 month contract to become acting IS director for our European operations Attached is a detailed job spec - and the "recruitment spec" is below Start date is asap and in any event not later than the end of July Rate is negotiable and will be market rate for a position of the. Let me know if you would like to take this opportunity further*

The consultants response:

*Thank you for your enquiry. The contract sounds very interesting and I would like to know more about the opportunity. Please contact me at your convenience - details below. (the sender highlighted the telephone number).*

*Kind Regards,*

The response he then received:

*er..... - I just did contact you? - tradition demands that you now tell me how/who/why you guys are the people to be using for this?*

After initially being more than a bit taken aback by the abruptness of the reply, my colleague calmed down and decided there must be crossed wires somewhere – so he picked up the telephone. It turned out that the person sending the e-mails had assumed he was sending the e-mail to a recruitment



[www.itaccesssed.com](http://www.itaccesssed.com)

Tel: 01748 825426

agency. The original sender apologised for the tone of the e-mail and the consultant may get some business from the company in question as a result! What might have happened if the consultant hadn't picked up the phone and had replied by e-mail instead?

## Summary

Someone in your organisation must take responsibility for ensuring your e-mail usage is as far as possible within the law.

Members of the organisation should be trained in how to use e-mail effectively.

Your organisation should almost certainly have an e-mail management policy. Further information is available from sources such as the [CIPD \(Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development\) website](#) or [www.outlaw.com](http://www.outlaw.com).