

The cost of poorly written, misexecuted e-mail can be higher than lost profits.



E-mail survey points TO EXPENSIVE PROBLEMS

BY MARCIA TILLET-ZINZOW

When it comes to e-mail, lack of clarity, unprofessional tone and needless forwarding could be expensive problems for Wisconsin CPAs.



Whether a hostile tone is intended or not, it can cause significant damage: a flicker of offense ignites a spark of defense that erupts into an all-out "flame war."

All 153 respondents to the WICPA/UpWrite Press September survey reported having to request clarification of the business e-mails they receive, and more than a third reported receiving daily e-mails they really don't need to see. Furthermore, a distinct majority reported that messages with a hostile or negative tone have created workplace conflict in their companies. These problems waste both worker time and company money.

UNCLEAR AND NEGATIVE MESSAGES

According to the survey, each day most Wisconsin CPAs receive up to 99 business e-mails, with some receiving more than 100, and a few getting 150 or more. All the respondents reported having to request clarification from the sender—up to 30 percent of the time—due to poorly written messages. If, on average, it takes 10 minutes to clarify an unclear message, think how many hours per day are wasted by poorly written e-mail.

Similarly, workplace conflict spurred by

negative e-mail has wasted time in about 58 percent of respondents' companies. While only 10 percent blame the conflict on overtly hostile messages, about 60 percent believe that "misperceived tone" is responsible. Most (66 percent) said they receive messages that could be perceived as hostile or inappropriate "once in awhile," but a collective 17 percent said they receive such negative messages daily, weekly, or several times a week.

Whether a hostile tone is intended or not, it can cause significant damage: a flicker of offense ignites a spark of defense that erupts into an all-out "flame war." Such conflicts can consume hours of productivity and leave employees smoldering.

INAPPROPRIATE PRACTICES

In addition to wasting time clarifying poorly written messages and dealing with workplace conflict, Wisconsin CPAs also waste time reading and deleting irrelevant e-mail messages. More than one-third (35 percent) of respondents said they are

copied daily on e-mail messages they need not see. Writers who copy others unnecessarily waste both their time and their readers' time.

Where security is concerned, 41 percent said their companies monitor employees' e-mail, and 17 percent reported having had employee e-mail subpoenaed for an investigation or lawsuit. E-discovery can be held up significantly, and can put companies at higher risk, when subpoenaed e-mail is ambiguously worded or carries a negative tone.

Finally, although 90 percent of respondents said their companies have firewalls that block spam before they see it, nearly 80 percent said that up to half of their total daily e-mail is still junk or spam.

Almost 18 percent reported that these unwelcome messages constitute more than 50 percent of their total daily e-mail.

THE COST OF POORLY WRITTEN E-MAIL

Junk e-mail, while irritating, isn't terribly expensive. It doesn't take long to delete a message recognized as spam. But lack of clarity, unprofessional tone and negative messages can prove costly. As an example, consider unclear messages. By some estimates, it takes about 10 minutes to clarify an unclear e-mail message of average length (one or two screens). This includes reading and rereading the message to try and make sense of it, e-mailing or phoning the sender to ask what was meant, and assimilating the new information.

Let's say you receive 35 e-mails a day, and five of them require clarification. That wastes 50 minutes a day. Then multiply those 50 minutes by five. That's 250 minutes, or about a half day, wasted weekly on poorly written e-mail messages. Multiplied by 50 weeks (52 in a year, less two weeks' vacation), the time loss equals 25 days per year. If everyone in the organization is doing the same thing (as survey results indicate), what are poor writing skills costing your company?

In addition, this example does not include or consider the cost of tasks poorly done, tasks that must be redone, or tasks

that aren't done at all due to unclear communication.

AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY

While the costs of poor writing are high, 79 percent of the survey respondents said their companies neither offer nor require a writing course for employees. Yet, careless wording, tone and practices can be easily corrected.

"Providing employees with just one day of business-writing training, or even having them take an online course, can help them to write more clearly and professionally and adopt sound e-mail practices," said Verne Meyer, a writing professor and author of numerous business-writing books published by Houghton Mifflin and UpWrite Press.

National studies show that nearly all American businesses now use e-mail as their primary communication mode. Studies also show that today's young professionals, in particular, lack good writing skills.

"In view of the economic impact, employers should consider improving employees' writing skills as part of their fiscal strategy," Meyer said.

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