Protecting Your Reputation in Cyberspace:
Introduction

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This series of articles looks at how we can use e-mail and other electronic communications responsibly and professionally. It is intended to provide useful information for corporate INFOSEC awareness programs.

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I first started using e-mail in 1982 at work, when I was a “systems engineer” for Hewlett-Packard Canada. In the early 1980s, E-mail was restricted mostly to businesses and academic users; a few thousand individuals exchanged messages through bulletin board systems (BBSs), and there were various schemes for mail relay among BBSs and value-added networks (VANs) such as Prodigy and Compuserve. Basically, amateurs did not have much exposure to electronic communications.

In contrast, today millions of people have grown up using e-mail, chat rooms and news groups from their childhood or youth, quite apart from businesses and formal organizations. Because of the rapid rise of these high-tech communications media, there has been a rupture in civility. There is a disjunction between the customs of civility and courtesy that were defined for earlier generations in terms of speech, telephone and written communications and the habits of a couple of generations who have developed their own style almost free of guidance from older people.

There is nothing unusual about different modes of communication for different contexts; conversational spoken language, for example, sounds quite different from the formal speech of conferences or the structured writing of an article. Speech between two long-married people, for example, is highly idiosyncratic. Jean-Paul Sartre once said that a good marriage is like a conversation that never ends, but the conversation becomes quite peculiar after a while. I remember my wife’s and my amusement when we heard a tape we accidentally made during a car trip when we must have somehow gotten a recorder going: it sounded completely off the wall (“Is that surprising?” I imagine some of you thinking) with sentence fragments, long companionable pauses, code words (e.g., “Do I have baboons?” “No, you have no baboons.”), resumption of topics many minutes later as if there had been no intervening content, and a general lack of any obvious structure.

From a business point of view, however, some of the people most comfortable with electronic communications have developed some bad habits. This series will serve a guide to standards of appropriate behavior when employees are communicating online. Topic areas will include

* Selling Products and Services
* Netiquette for Beginners
* Public Relations Nightmares
* Appropriate Use Policies
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