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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The most important principle you can teach your network users is that every communication made using the organization’s e-mail system should be considered as equivalent to something written on official letterhead. Lack of professionalism in such communications can seriously damage the entire organization’s reputation and credibility.

We have already looked at spamming – sending unsolicited commercial e-mail. Other forms of unwanted messages include hoaxes and chain letters. Many hoaxes refer to non-existent malicious software; a general policy that makes sense is to explain to all users that they must not broadcast any warnings. Users alarmed by such messages should simply contact their technical support team and let experts investigate (and often debunk) stories of exploding monitors, damaged disk drives and the like. As for chain letters (messages asking people to forward a warning, health information, or a petition to everyone in the recipient’s address book), adults ought to know better than to forward such drivel, but at least within the organization, such forwarding can be interdicted by policy.

A simple lack of professionalism is to send or publish correspondence (or worse, articles) with spelling, grammatical or factual errors. Yes, of course no one is perfect, and the occasional blunder is forgivable (I sure hope so, given the errors I have made in print). What I am referring to is slovenly writing: poorly thought-through ideas, poorly expressed. Anyone can use a spell-checker at the very least; even a grammar-checker is better than nothing. But if an employee is involved in public discourse, especially on an important and highly-visible topic, it might be a good idea to have the Public Relations (Marketing, Corporate Communications. . . .) experts check the content and style before launching it into the public sphere.

Another form of unprofessional behavior is “flaming.” Many users of e-mail and of the USENET think that making rude remarks about the people with whom they are corresponding is just a normal way of expressing disagreement. But rudeness is unprofessional. It is inappropriate for a professional to use profanity, obscenity, sarcasm, and other demeaning modes of expression. Even more embarrassing is to see correspondents who make ad hominem remarks – comments about the personality or personal characteristics of others. “If you had bothered to read what I wrote. . . .” or “You are obviously incapable of understanding my point. . . .” and similar slurs and innuendos demean not only the recipient but also the sender. They can certainly embarrass the sender’s employer.

The converse is that as recipients, we need to be tolerant of what may appear to be rudeness.
Not everyone has the practice required to write with sensitivity and subtlety, and sometimes people’s sentences misrepresent their intentions. There is no cause for a professional to respond to other people’s rudeness by descending into the written equivalent of a shouting match, regardless of provocation.

My own practice has been to avoid flaming back when I receive even private communications that cross the rudeness boundary. Over the years, I have occasionally written viciously vitriolic responses to rude people and laughed uproariously at how much fun it is to fight back. Then I have deleted the nastygrams and written back as politely as I can. The professional responses have not necessarily been friendly, but at least they were civil.

Corporate users should be made aware of these principles in policies and in training classes. It might even be fun having users practice responding to rude messages with civil responses as part of the classes.

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