I recently received a 30-word e-mail message from a very nice reader in Britain and noticed that his e-mail system added the following astonishing disclaimer, which I quote in its sonorous totality after scrubbing it of identifying details:

> This email, its contents and any files or attachments transmitted with it are intended solely for the addressee(s) and may be legally privileged and/or confidential. Access by any other party is unauthorised without the express written permission of the sender.

If you have received this email in error you may not copy or use the contents, files, attachments or information in any way nor disclose the same to any other person. Please destroy it and contact the sender on the number printed above, via the <Name of Bank> switchboard on +44 (0) nnnn nnnnnn for <place1> and +44 (0) nnnn nnnnnn for <place2> or via email by return.

Internet communications are not secure unless protected using strong cryptography. This email has been prepared using information believed by the author to be reliable and accurate, but <Name of Bank> makes no warranty or representation, express or implied, as to its accuracy or completeness and is not liable to you or to anyone else for any loss or damage in connection with any transmission sent by the Bank to you over the Internet. <Name of Bank> makes no warranty that any information or material is free from any defects or viruses.

In particular <Name of Bank> does not accept responsibility for changes made to this email after it was sent. If you suspect that this email may have been amended or intercepted, please contact the sender in the manner stated above. If this transmission includes files or attachments, please ensure that they are opened within the relevant application to ensure full receipt. If you experience difficulties, please refer back to the sender in the manner stated above.

Any opinions expressed in this transmission are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Bank and may be subject to change without notice.

Please note that for the purposes of this document all references to <Name of Bank> or the Bank shall be taken to mean <Name of Bank> (place) Limited or any other member of the <Bigger> Bank Group. Nothing in this transmission shall or shall be deemed to constitute an offer or acceptance of an offer or otherwise have the effect of forming a contract by electronic communication.

I commented in my response to my correspondent, “Did you know that your message has 30 words (152 bytes including spaces) whereas your disclaimer has 367 words (2177 bytes)? That's the lowest signal-to-noise ratio (6.5% useful info out of the total and a 72.6:1::noise:signal ratio) I've ever seen outside a copy-of-copy-of-copy chain. Please congratulate your attorneys on making maximal use of bandwidth!”

Really, this disclaimer does seem excessively detailed to me. If the same level of legalistic caution were applied to phone calls, it would make a wonderful Monty Python skit:
“OK then, I’ll see you at lunch tomorrow.”

“Yep, but wait – you have to listen to the automated legal disclaimer our attorneys have programmed into our phone system. Just hang on [buzz, click]. [metallic voice] This phone message is intended solely for the recipient(s) and may be legally privileged and/or….”

Or what about introducing this degree of caution into face-to-face interactions?

“So how do you want your hot-dog, with mustard and relish or without?”

“With both, please. And this verbal instruction is intended solely for the recipient(s) and may be legally privileged and/or….”

On a more serious level, cluttering up e-mail messages this way is a waste of bandwidth. It’s worse in offices where people copy entire messages without editing the contents, resulting in copy-of-copy-of-copy chains that spread like cancerous eruptions through inboxes throughout the organization. I have personally seen messages that are 20 levels deep, all of them including the headers, salutations, copies of previous messages and disclaimers in a long string of garbage contributing nothing whatever to enlightened discourse. Some well-meaning folks even include the detailed headers in their copies.

As a matter of courtesy and good sense, when one replies to a message, it’s a simple matter to strip non-essentials out of the copy of the original. I use ellipses (… for cuts within a sentence, … for cuts crossing sentence boundaries) to signal gaps, but usually one or two snips are enough to clean up the copy so that the reader can get the gist of the conversation without having to wade through reams of superfluous stuff.

So the next time you encounter a huge disclaimer laid like an unsightly pile of refuse at the bottom of a colleague’s e-mail message, you can use a slightly modified British expression in your response: “UNSTUFF IT!”

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP is Associate Professor in the Division of Business and Management at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mkabay@norwich.edu>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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