Managing Private E-mail at Work

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Recently I was getting ready to invite colleagues to the annual Gay Pride parade in Burlington (http://www.pridevt.com) using my employer’s e-mail. My wife and I have been marching in such parades for 20 years and I had planned to use my personal e-mail account for the invitation and not to include my professional signature block in the message. However, I have a long-standing objection to the use of corporate e-mail for personal purposes, so I resolved the problem by writing to specific colleagues to ask for their personal e-mail addresses and invited them to join the parade in entirely personal messages.

What’s wrong with using corporate e-mail for jokes, invitations, and the like? One issue is the waste of bandwidth. Some people find the quality of the jokes, hoaxes and cheering sessions low enough to be irritating. Another problem arises with politically sensitive messages such as my announcement – some members of a group may find particular events or viewpoints offensive. Why should everyone in the group be subjected to a barrage of unsolicited e-mail just because they work somewhere?

The question also raises some valuable and instructive points about appropriate-use policies for e-mail. First, we don’t have a formal written policy on appropriate use of our official e-mail. In the coming months, I propose to work with my colleagues to frame clear written policies that any of our staff members can easily consult for guidance about suitable and unsuitable content for personal messages using the SGS NU mailing addresses. Such policies will reduce possible disappointments and resentments resulting from decisions based on unwritten expectations. In addition, any hint of discrimination based on particular political or religious biases will have to be scrutinized to ensure that we are not subject to legal repercussions.

In more general terms, I believe that clear written guidance for effective use of e-mail is essential for any organization to ensure privacy, maintain security, respect requirements for archiving of data and avoid legal liability of many kinds, including restrictions imposed under the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA), 20 USC §1232(g) (http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/reg/ferpa/index.html).

An easy tool that we can develop is a voluntary mailing list of non-work e-mail addresses for non-work e-mail. A Yahoo group (http://groups.yahoo.com/), for example, offers many benefits over an informal list in the CC: or TO: field. In my next column, I’ll explore this option in more detail.

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