

PUPnetiquette

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We Need the PUPnetiquette to Avoid Conflict and False Expectations

As a virtual organization that operates globally across many time zones with multiple simultaneous projects and is constantly integrating new people from different cultures into the system, having a set of courtesy communication guidelines that normalizes different behaviors becomes essential to avoid conflicts and false expectations.

Most Important Recommendations

Recommendation	Explanation
Confirm receipt immediately	This is the single most important problem we face: people receive emails that require a response or action and responses do not come for days or even weeks, seeding doubt and frustration with the sender. When you receive an email that requires a response, confirm within two days. If you cannot act immediately, then indicate when you will respond or act.
Don't change the thread or delete the original message	When responding to someone's message, copy its entire thread (conversation history) in your response. It is not fair to respond "yes" and the original sender cannot remember what the question was because it was not copied. Though automatic copying is a feature of all email programs, many people still do not use it or they change the subject line and thus change the thread. Be fair to the recipient; include previous messages.
Be careful of sensitive information	When you send an email, the wrong person may eventually see it. Always consider that what you write will be seen by unintended readers. Inevitably all emails are stored in multiple servers around the world and leave a digital footprint. Avoid copying a person's message to a third person who might see language that wasn't intended for their eyes, causing political trouble.
Indicate when you will be out of email contact	If you will be away from email for longer periods than your colleagues are accustomed, notify that you will be away so that they do not wonder if messages have been received. This normally applies to vacations and fieldwork. The expected response time depends on the person.
Use voice confirmation when unsure of another's possible negative feelings	It is easy to misinterpret feelings due to lack of feedback and sloppy or careless writing. Sometimes understanding how a person feels is crucial to an agreement, task, etc. If you suspect that a person is mad, confirm by phone. DO NOT assume a person is upset. The mind has many biases that contribute to misjudgments through email. Similarly if you do have a conflict, email not only slows resolution, it can worsen conflict. It takes more courage to call, but it resolves the problem with much greater efficiency. Request a third person to facilitate if necessary.

Less Important Recommendations

Recommendation	Explanation
Indicate clearly what kind of response is requested	Be clear about what kind of action and response is requested: is a response or action necessary or is it voluntary (“offer input if you have any”)? This helps the recipient prioritize their messages and tasks.
Use ALL CAPS only to yell	Words in all caps are both much harder to read and also interpreted on the Internet as the equivalent of YELLING. If you do not want to yell or make reading more difficult for the receiver, do not use all caps. Some people use all caps to differentiate their response to a sender’s comments within the text. It is better to use a different color if you are writing in text only, use an arrow or similar: → I think this is a great idea. ...Or... ***** I agree.
Be careful of emotions and humor in emails	Related to voice confirmation above, it is hard to interpret sarcasm, happiness, and sadness in an email without verbal or non-verbal language cues like tone, smiles, winks, etc. The first guideline is to avoid sarcasm or implied emotion. You should explicit write your feelings: “This disappoints me.” “This makes me sad.” This way leaves no doubt, obviating need for a voice confirmation.
Protect recipients’ email privacy when replying to all	Often people send messages to multiple recipients. Sometimes it helps to show all addresses so that recipients can communicate. Mostly, however, it is not necessary to show all. In fact, every message sent runs the risk that a spammer will intercept and use addresses for spam. Respect people’s privacy and identity when sending mass email messages by hiding addresses in the Blind Carbon Copy field.
Use reasonable file size enclosures	As technology evolves, people send and receive larger files with less difficulty. Today however you should ask if a recipient can receive enclosures greater than 5–10 Mb. Some servers prohibit large files. If you do not ask, expect a confirmation receipt. There are multiple free services that allow large file transfer such as Dropbox or Google Docs.
Write clear subject lines	Write a clear topic in the subject line of your email so that the receiver can sort through messages without opening them. Do not put “stuff” or “things” or leave the subject blank.
Avoid spreading viruses	Viruses still infect people’s computers and send out dangerous spam. If you receive spam from a known email address, you should inform the address owner immediately. Never open an enclosure if there is doubt whether it was actually sent by the person, virus, or malware.
Use the smallest mailing list possible	If you want to share information with a subset of the organization, choose the smallest mailing list that contains only those you want to receive the information. If you would like to create a new list for a group, request at info@pupconsortium.net . This avoids sending unwanted messages.

It is important to point out to colleagues within a group that has agreed to use these recommendations when a recommendation could be better implemented. This way the group learns to change its communication habits.