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Twelve Tips to Tame the E-mail Tiger

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When you picked it up, it was a cute little kitten, fun, friendly, and no trouble. Now it's grown into a tiger, devouring large chunks of your day, clawing you from time to time, and hard to control. It's the E-mail Tiger. Remember when technology was going to save us time? Add that to, "The Check's in the Mail" as one of the great lies. Yes, E-mail is a wonderful tool. So is a chainsaw. Both require careful handling. Below are twelve tips for turning e-mail from a bad master into a good servant.

1. **Remember that e-mail creates a trail and a record.** It can be traced back to you. It can be forwarded by the recipient, accidentally or maliciously. Because of the ease of copying and forwarding, it's much more likely than a letter to be seen by eyes it was not intended for. If you wouldn't put a thought into a letter, don't put it in e-mail. Think, "Would I be comfortable if this e-mail message was passed around my next board or staff meeting?" If the answer is no, think twice. "E-slander" is as actionable as any other kind.
2. **Establish separate business and personal e-mail addresses.** Especially, try to keep your business address from your joke-sending friends. It's too easy for that off-color or ethnic joke, which you didn't originate and maybe didn't even like, to slip into the business system if it's on your work computer. Almost all jokes offend someone, or can be used by folks who want to appear to have been offended. Keep the personal at home. You may also wish to create different screen names for web surfing, as "spammers" harvest e-mail addresses from visited websites.
3. **Remember that e-mail can be edited.** The e-mail you send saying, "My boss is a great guy" can be changed to "My boss is a fat Twinkie" and forwarded. There's not much you can do about a sociopath who totally changes your message or creates a new one over your name, except to try to catch up with the lie. But much more common is the taking of key remarks out of context and responding to them. The recipient may not think that this is wrong, and often it's not. But quoting only part of an e-mail message, especially in a dispute, can't help but put a "spin" on the context. Is there something in the message that, if quoted out of context and responded to, would do harm? Think a third time.
4. **Use the "Reply" and "Reply all" buttons carefully.** Is your response something that everyone on the list should see? Hit "Reply All," as this will save the recipient the trouble of forwarding it, and eliminate the danger of selective forwarding. Conversely, is this a reply just to the sender, which will only be clutter to the other recipients? Hit "Reply." More importantly, is your reply confidential? Hit "Reply." Or, worse, is it insulting to someone on the list? See tip number one! Always check the "To" list on the message before you hit "Send." Someday that habit will save you embarrassment—or perhaps your job.
5. **Make a hard copy, when needed.** E-mail on your computer will eventually be deleted, and will certainly become hard to find in the clutter. I once had a staff member who printed and filed every e-mail message.

She was a hard worker in many other unproductive ways as well. But paper copies of some e-mail messages should be in your files. Copy messages such as instructions to do something that might be controversial, your response to hot political issues, or notes of praise for your personnel file. Almost every week I find myself searching for, and often not finding, an e-mail message from a few weeks or months back. Save paper copies of those that really matter.

6. **Create folders.** Don't let your incoming messages pile up in your in-box. Create perhaps one folder for board members' messages, one for items to be permanently saved, one for staff messages, one for each of a few special topics or programs (such as a political issue), and one for general mail. Also create a "personal" box, for those personal message that slip through, despite your compartmentalized social and professional addresses. Clean this file out regularly. Leave only current messages still requiring answers or action in your in-box. Delete those immediately that you know you'll not need, and drag the rest to the proper folder. You wouldn't leave every piece of paper that came in for a year piled on your desk, would you?
7. **Clean out the folders.** Except for the "Save Permanently" file, I try to clean out all messages over six months old once a month. Yes, I've wished I had messages I deleted. But it also means I can find the more current ones a lot faster. (Thank goodness for the "Find" feature in Outlook, or I'd never locate older messages.)
8. **Respond promptly.** People expect faster replies to e-mail messages than to letters or even phone calls. If you can't get them the info or take the action they want right away, let them know you are working on it. Use the "autoreply" feature when you are going to be out of the office for more than a day. And check your business e-mail more than once a day, but don't drive yourself nuts interrupting your other work every time "you've got mail" dings.
9. **Put an automatic signature on every e-mail message you send.** It's a mark of courtesy and courage to sign your correspondence. It also helps people who get a forwarded message to know from whom it came. If I signed my messages "Bob," someone down the line might, just possibly, know another "Bob." A signature also lets you put your mission statement, conference dates or other note on the bottom of your messages. At home, I've created several signatures with pithy quotes after my contact info.
10. **Create a letterhead in your word processing program.** That allows you to send professional-looking letters as attachments, with your scanned-in signature as well. It's a great convenience.
11. **Think about the subject line.** For something not very important, I add "FYI" before the subject. I also use "PLEASE RESPOND" and "CONFIDENTIAL" after typing in the subjects, to alert my recipients to what I need from them.
12. **Those guys in Nigeria?** They don't really have THIRTY TWO MILLION US DOLLARS in TRAPPED FUNDS they want to share with you.

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