Email Etiquette for the

Humanities Division

As part of the Division’s aim to develop a more inclusive and respectful working environment, faculties are encouraged to pay greater attention to email etiquette. Handling the volume and nature of email is a challenge for all of us. Its relentlessness is a cause of stress in itself, and there is considerable evidence that it can become a vehicle of bullying. This document suggests some ways in which we can use email more effectively and appropriately. It does not lay down rules, but underlines the significance of the principle of greater self-reflexivity in this interpersonal context (as in others).

For important general guidance on Network etiquette from IT Services, see: <https://help.it.ox.ac.uk/email/netiquette/index>

The nature of email interaction will necessarily vary according to the correspondents. But the onus rests with the sender to reflect on and show sensitivity to the particular circumstances of those to whom emails are being sent. Some colleagues and students find it easier to email at night. However, emails received outside conventional work hours – especially deep into the night or at weekends – have the potential to make their recipients feel unduly pressured and preoccupy them when they might reasonably expect not to be ‘at work’. If you are writing emails late at night or in the early hours of the morning, consider saving them in draft, and either sending them in the morning, or using ‘Options’ and then ‘Delay delivery’ to time them to send when working hours commence. In any case, make it clear that you do not expect an immediate response.

In communication with colleagues, consider carefully whether your email is really necessary, and avoid lengthy email exchanges which may be perceived as bombardment. As you would be in face to face conversation, be sensitive to tone of voice, and be aware of competing pressures on people’s time and energy. Avoid marking a message as of ‘high importance’ unless it is absolutely critical.

Consider also the role and experience of your correspondent. In particular, treat professional services staff with consideration and respect for the parameters of their job. Be alert to the power dynamics at play: there is an important rhetorical difference between emails sent to friends or peers and those sent when you are in a role of authority or line-management.

The subject-matter of the email is pertinent to when it is appropriate to send it. For example, it would be inappropriate and insensitive for either an academic or a member of professional support staff to send negative feedback to a student in the middle of the night when it would be impossible for them to seek or find support.

Try to provide a reasonable ‘lead time’ (several working days) when you send emails with documents attached for attention and that require work for meetings. You should avoid – unless you have expressly agreed this timetable with the correspondent(s) - sending materials last thing in the working day to be read/worked on by the recipient the following working day. Equally you yourself should not feel obliged or pressured to respond to emails (especially composing/sending references or supporting materials for funding applications) at very short notice. It is the sender’s obligation to send you full information in good time.

If you receive an email addressed to you as part of a group from which a collective response is required, make sure you ‘reply all’. If this is **not** in fact the case, be very careful to avoid ‘replying all’ and filling up others’ inboxes or – much more seriously - inadvertently spreading a message intended only for one person.

You should not extract and use text from someone else's message without acknowledgment. Do not make changes to someone else's message and pass it on without making it clear where you have altered it. If you receive an email from a colleague within the collegiate university, there will usually be an indication in the body of the message if you are asked/invited to forward to other people not in the string. Otherwise you should think carefully before forwarding emails to other parties, especially those with email addresses other than ‘ox.ac.uk’. You should exercise particular caution and restraint in forwarding attachments. Nor should you extract/redact/quote from an email in social media. As with a letter, information is being sent to you for a particular purpose and has not been composed for wider distribution.

At the same time, you should be aware of the risks of any email communication. When you are dealing with a sensitive or confidential matter, it will usually be more appropriate to send an email simply requesting the addressee to contact you by phone (providing them with a number and times you are available or requesting them to send you that information). In the body of your email, when you are writing about a confidential or sensitive matter avoid using full or first names (or even initials) of parties under discussion. This is especially important in the light of GDPR. Any confidential attachments containing personal data should be encrypted/password-protected.

Whilst everyone will sometimes miss messages, it is important to check email regularly and acknowledge receipt, even if only with a holding response, especially if you are being asked a question by a colleague or a student. Failure to do so inadvertently creates more work for others. When you go away, install an automatic reply system advising that you will not be able to respond during that period. In your automatic reply, tell people that you will respond on your return, rather than expecting them to resend after your return for your attention. If you are exceptionally busy at a particular moment, put up a message indicating that you may be slower than usual in responding to emails. But use this facility sparingly: routine autoreplies of this sort can irritate colleagues who feel equally busy.

If you are angry or upset by an email, it is normally best not to reply immediately. If you prefer to compose an email response in the moment, save it in drafts and look at it the next day to decide whether you need to send it or not, and/or whether re-casting it would help to avoid escalation of tension or misunderstanding.

In all these respects, email is analogous to other forms of conversation, and requires equivalent thought and sensitivity to the reciprocities involved.