

Why Your Business Needs an E-Mail Policy

by Judith Kallos

Why is it imperative to have a company E-Mail Policy? It is simply good business, that's why!

In addition, having a clear and detailed e-mail policy in place, one that employees sign and date before they are allowed access through your business's computers, is critical to you being able to enforce or react to situations that may arise at a later date.

Even assuming you have the best folks working for you, or on your behalf, does not negate the need for this type of policy to be established. Hopefully, you will never need to refer to your policy statement in regard to an employee's actions or behavior while on company time. However, if you do find yourself in that situation down the road, you will be relieved these terms and conditions are in place for your protection.

With technology now in the workplace and e-mail accessible to more employees than ever, connectivity makes it easy for all employees to surf the Web on company time, circulate unnecessary and/or inappropriate messages and illegally copy content. These activities can lead to:

=> Claims of sexual harassment and discrimination. This occurs when e-mail or information is forwarded to an employee who may not have the same sense of humor as the sender. We all have had our e-mail boxes filled by well intending friends with the latest joke or chain letter, some of which could offend the recipient or are not appropriate in a professional environment.

=> Misaddressed messages that lead to intentional or inadvertent release of corporate trade secrets. One typo, dot, dash or space where it shouldn't be (and folks typo e-mail addresses all the time) and your company information can very easily end up being delivered to another e-mail address outside of the company.

=> Network and spam attacks. Those who do not understand the basics of Online Netiquette, many times put themselves in a situation of having e-mail bombs or repetitive e-mail being sent which can cripple your network due to their actions. Employees who do not market your business within established protocols can cause your server and ISP to cancel your accounts due to spam complaints to your hosting and e-mail providers.

=> Copyright infringement issues and the possible legalities that can ensue. Copyright is one of the most misunderstood issues online. Many believe that information, graphics, etc. are online for the taking. Right click and it is yours! To set the record straight, there is nothing further from the truth. All information and graphic images are protected by the person who created them. To take content or images without the creator's/author's written permission is copyright infringement. It is also copyright infringement to forward or quote another person's private e-mail in a public venue such as mailing lists and discussion groups without their written permission to do so.

Abuse of e-mail may also lead to:

=> Waste of computer resources. Large gratuitous downloads can negatively impact your bandwidth allowances and incur additional charges from your provider not to mention lower employee productivity.

=> Drain on limited storage capabilities. Limits in disk storage space can easily be maxed out incurring additional charges.

=> Slower response times for legitimate business activities. Focus is lost on priorities and customer service. Company e-mail activities should be considered one of the highest priorities that many times will fall by the wayside in lieu of employees becoming sidetracked by these other activities.

=> Increased network traffic. Unnecessary network traffic can cause your entire network to come to a grinding halt if acceptable computer and online usage is not clearly defined.

=> E-mail forgery. I could send an e-mail today appearing to be Bill Gates. Only those with an above average technical knowledge would be able to determine it was a hoax and trace it back to me.

All company e-mails should use your dot co/com/net/org to identify all employees. E-mail settings should not be tampered with or changed for any reason.

=> Create a negative perception of your business image, legitimacy and level of credibility. One cannot underestimate the power of perception as it relates to your business's e-mail activities. Each e-mail should be taken as seriously as though it were written on company letterhead. How it is written, the words used, whether proper Netiquette is practiced or lack thereof can have a negative impact on those communicating with your company.

Any e-mail policy should start with the following basics. You will want to review each carefully and then jot down and add the specifics unique to your business environment and culture.

1) Specify that the computer and e-mail system belongs to the business for authorized purposes only. While on company time any use of the Company's equipment (computer) is to be used solely for business activities related to the performance of an employee's job responsibilities.

2) Set clear expectations of employee privacy. What will be private and what won't - if anything. Trends indicate that the majority of e-mail policies currently in place state clearly that while on company time, employees should not expect to have any privacy in regard to their use of company owned equipment and resources.

3) Establish monitoring as a "right" of the employer. It should be expected and acknowledged.

4) Make sure employees understand attention should be taken when addressing e-mail and when drafting them to avoid including copyrighted material. Each e-mail an employee sends utilizing an e-mail address with your dot com/org/net reflects on your business and makes you inevitably liable if another author's information is misused without their permission. Not only are there legal ramifications, but again, do not underestimate how your enterprise will be perceived by virtue of the use of a company e-mail address in communications.

5) Outline specific types of content that should be avoided in e-mail messages. The more detail the better here!

6) Have employees sign and date the e-mail policy. Put a copy in their personnel file and give them a copy to have on hand for reference purposes.

It would also be recommended that each employee be sent to my OnlineNetiquette.com site or given a copy of my soon to be released book: "Because Netiquette Matters! Your comprehensive reference guide on e-mail etiquette and proper technology use." This will ensure they are aware of all the issues and practices they need to integrate when e-mailing on behalf of and using your company's resources to communicate online.

For a sample E-mail Policy that you can use and modify, visit my main consulting site @:
http://www.theistudio.com/example_epolicy.html

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Judith Kallos is an authoritative and good-humored Technology Muse who has been playing @
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