

E-Mail in Haste, Panic at Leisure

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Q. *You accidentally sent a disparaging e-mail message about a co-worker to the co-worker. What should you do now?*

A. Acknowledge your error immediately. Elizabeth Freedman, a management consultant in Natick, Mass., said the worst thing to do after committing an e-mail gaffe is to pretend you didn't do it. "Don't sit around and hope and pray that your e-mail didn't get read or was somehow lost in cyberspace," she said. "Hit the ground running and take action to repair the damage."

Q. *Do these kinds of slip-ups happen often?*

A. Surprisingly, they do. Employees most commonly send e-mail messages to the wrong person, or inadvertently send out draft notes as final. Carelessness is often the cause: as employees rush to send hundreds of messages in a given day, many fail to check the content and addressee of each note.

Technology could be a factor as well. Many e-mail programs include an addressing function called AutoComplete that suggests recipients based on names in a user's address book. When the sender starts typing a name in the "To" field, the software automatically fills in the first alphabetical match.

But Eric M. Rosenberg, president of LitigationProofing, a liability consulting firm in Mamaroneck, N.Y., says the software's suggestion is not always the sender's intended recipient.

"We tend to address e-mail with the same attention we give to driving while talking on the cellphone," Mr. Rosenberg said. "In many cases this can lead to disaster."

Another culprit may be the "Reply All" feature in most e-mail programs, a button that lets recipients of a mass e-mail message respond to the sender and everyone else who received a particular note. Mr. Rosenberg notes that employees often hit this button when they mean to hit just "Reply" and unknowingly send a personal note to dozens or hundreds of people.

Q. *Are there ways to recapture misdirected e-mail?*

A. Not really. Some e-mail programs, like the Outlook program in Microsoft Office, come with an optional recall feature, but in most cases the feature doesn't let a sender actually

yank a message from the recipient's mailbox. Instead, the feature sends the recipient a second message announcing that the sender wishes to recall the first.

Chris Schneider, a product marketing manager at Microsoft, said the recall feature could actually recall a note, but only if both sender and recipient used the same e-mail server and the recipient had not yet opened the original note.

Robbie Kellman Baxter, president of Peninsula Strategies, an online services consulting firm in Palo Alto, Calif., said that efforts to retrieve a message rarely achieved the intended goal. "People think that when they hit recall, this magic hand goes out and pulls that message from everyone's in-box and makes it disappear," she said. But the second messages only serve to highlight the original messages, she said: "They're attention-grabbers."

Q. *If you send an errant note, should you apologize?*

A. A sincere apology always helps to defuse the situation. Deliver this message in person; if you don't work in the recipient's office, pick up the phone. Jennifer Selby, president of the Selby Group, a management consulting firm in San Francisco, says that conversing in real time shows that you are willing to make things right.

"You've already taken the low road; now take the high road," she said. "While it's true that you've made a terrible mistake and have probably hurt your co-worker, you can still salvage your working relationship by taking a direct and open approach."

Q. *What kind of recourse does your colleague have against you?*

A. Depending on whom you offend and how, your message could land you in trouble. The maligned co-worker could, for instance, forward your disparaging message to the boss, an action that may well raise an eyebrow or two at your next performance review. At worst, a misdirected message could lead to dismissal.

Kate Zabriskie, president of Business Training Works, a consulting firm in Port Tobacco, Md., said a formal complaint could be filed with the human resources department, especially if the recipient felt like a victim of harassment.

"The problem is that e-mail lives forever," Ms. Zabriskie said. "Once you send it, the note is out there and can be used against you by anyone."

Q. *Can any good come from this uncomfortable situation?*

A. As long as the co-worker is willing to forgive you, this kind of incident can force

both parties to speak honestly and make amends.

Regina Barr, president and chief executive of Red Ladder, a management consulting firm in Inver Grove Heights, Minn., said that sometimes an e-mail gaffe was just what two colleagues needed to prompt an overdue discussion about getting along.

"You are going to put your heart on your sleeve," she said. "If you and your co-worker ever have something to hash out, this is the perfect chance to do it. You could even end up as friends."

At the very least, the painful process of recovery from misdirected notes should teach employees to be more careful before they click the "Send" button and to make sure they're sending e-mail messages to the right places.

Fast communication by e-mail is a valuable business tool, but remember that the flip side of instant gratification is instant mortification.