

Emails

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There is no question that the worst thing that has happened in my life is the invention of email. All of us are drowning in emails; hundreds of emails each day. And they cannot be ignored. Some are merely “junk” emails – masses of communication sent to millions of us. But others have great import – business or personal – with the sender anxiously waiting for a response. Each of us becomes impatient when we reach out to someone else by email and they do not instantaneously respond. “What is the matter with them?” we ask ourselves. “Why hasn’t she responded to my email – it’s been an hour.” So we feel compelled to rapidly respond to emails. And while we are responding to one email, a prompt comes up interrupting our thought, so we get yet another email. Gone are prior means of communication. Faxes are extinct. Written letters are becoming rapidly a dinosaur. Even voicemail is declining in usage. And heaven forbid we actually walk down the hall to see someone. In short, we are not talking to each other, but content to text or email someone. Emails lead to misinterpretation. We do not hear a vocal inflection of the sender and think someone is angry when they are not. The sender cannot gauge the demeanor of the recipient, eliminating the ability to backtrack when someone misinterprets an email. No one I know has been able to manage their emails. Instead, we spend countless hours each day sorting emails into file cabinets for later retrieval. In both business and law, emails become something that run our life. Emails require a new etiquette. Not only responding promptly, but using obscure abbreviations like “LOL” or the proverbial happy face. Simple manners become annoyances. Please don’t say “thank you” to my email. It merely requires me to require another 10 seconds reading it and deleting it. Heaven forbid, do not “Reply All” when you only need to reply to the sender, and the worst offender is the person who uses “Reply All” to say “Thank you.” That single act it can require thousands of people to merely go through the action of deleting. Think of the time cumulatively spent on that simple delete keystroke. Worse, the pace of emails precludes thought and deliberation. Instead, we respond without thinking with whatever words immediately traipse across our mind. Often those are the wrong words. A wizened old judge tells the story that captures the drawbacks of emails:

“Years ago, partners in law firms had secretaries. They performed a weird ritual called ‘shorthand.’ When you became agitated against one of your partners, you would call your secretary in and dictate a lengthy diatribe. Wisely, she would not type that diatribe until after you returned from your three martini lunch. By then, your anger of the moment had worn off. When she showed you your earlier tirade, you waived it off saying, ‘Aw, Jim’s an OK guy. Just rip up that note.’ Today, however, you instantaneously

send Jim an angry email. He responds in kind. Back and forth like a tennis volley, the angry emails go in a verbal war.”

This isn’t progress. It is the decline of human interaction. So remember some simple thoughts in dealing with emails. “KIS.” Keep it simple. Wait before you send an email or a response. Reflect on the email as if it had the same gravity as that old formal letter. Review each email as if you may one day be called to a witness stand and not be embarrassed by what you wrote. And when in doubt about an email, don’t send it. It will save you the agony of an angry email war. In short, emails have changed our world. They make communication easier but also harder at the same time. *Reprinted with the permission of The Circuit Rider, the journal of the Seventh Circuit Bar Association.*

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