

The University of Manchester

Email Best Practice Guidelines

Email can provide an invaluable means of communication, but our emails need to be clear and concise if we want them to be effective. These guidelines outline email best practice for University of Manchester staff.

1. *Is email the correct tool?*

Before drafting an email pause and consider if it is the most appropriate communication method. Face-to-face or a quick telephone call may be more effective, particularly if the topic is sensitive or confidential or very urgent.

2. *Writing an email*

- **Action:** Consider what action you would like the recipient to take when they receive the message and make this clear (if you don't know neither will they).
- **Subject line:** Treat this as the label on the tin. Include (concisely) as much information as possible about what the recipient is required to do, including for example, dates, deadlines, times and locations.
- **Suffix:** Useful tool for the subject line to indicate what is required of the recipient. Suffix can then be used as a tag to sort emails into folders. Examples include [Info], [action] [urgent] [project code]
- **Email length:** Avoid lengthy emails as the message or action can become lost or confused. If you are communicating complex information then consider using an attachment or link to a document. Avoid replying with email history unless it is necessary.
- **Attachments:** Avoid sending large attachments or documents of a sensitive nature. An alternative is to use a shared folder or an online document management system.
- **Email signatures:** All emails (including replies and forwards) should include an email signature which includes job title, department, location and phone number. Email signatures can also be used to convey other information such as working hours, working days and multiple work locations.
- **Final check:** It is advisable to re-read your emails before sending to check that the message is clear, that attachments have been inserted and spelling has been checked.

3. *Recipients, reply all and automatic replies*

- **Recipients:** Consider the recipients of your email and be clear what- if anything – you want them to do.
 - The “To” field should only be used for recipients who you are asking to take action.

- The “cc” field is for recipients who need to see the information. Think carefully about who you need to communicate with and limit the ‘ccs’ to this group only. The “bcc” field should be used if you do not wish to share an email addresses with other recipients.
- **Reply all:** “Reply all” creates large numbers of emails which are often irrelevant. Before using the “reply all” consider if all the recipients need to know or take some action. Also consider whether they should have access to all of the information contained in the message.
- **Automatic replies:** When you are away from the office for a full day or longer, your “out office” should be enabled as a response for all internal and emails. It should contain the date you will return to work and an alternative contact.

4. Responses

When responding to an email, double check that you have addressed all the points/questions that were raised – this reduces the need for further emails seeking clarification.

5. Response time expectations

The use of mobiles and tablets has led to people expecting a very fast response to emails - even at evenings and weekends. During the working week it is not reasonable to expect a response in less than 24 hours. It is certainly not reasonable to expect a response in the evenings and at weekends. If a response is required in minutes or hours, then email is probably not the most effective communication tool.

6. Inbox Management

- **Frequency of checking emails:** Checking emails numerous times during the working day, out of working hours and during leave can lead to stress. Check your emails 3-4 times a day This will allow you to focus on specific tasks without constant interruption
- **Email preview:** The email preview bubble can often cause a distraction and it is advisable to turn this off.
- **Organising email:** Avoid letting unread emails build up in your inbox. Here are three rules for creating and maintaining an organised inbox:
 1. Deal with emails which only need a quick response as soon as possible
 2. File emails requiring a longer, more considered response in a pending file
 3. Archive old emails which you need to retain and delete all others

Further training to complement and expand on these guidelines will be available via the Staff Training and Development Unit from late July 2014