

## Email Ethics and Good Practice - A Sample Policy

The growth of electronic mail has been spectacular. As with any new facility, it takes a while to develop the limits within which users must and should operate, and for users to become aware of those limits.

The "Code of Ethics" sets out the rules, which every piece of email **must** follow. Breach of this code in respect of a single piece of email will be considered a breach of the Company Regulations and dealt with accordingly.

The "Guidelines for Good Practice" sets out the conventions, which should be followed so as to maximise the effectiveness of email as a medium of communication and to minimise the possible negative effects. While breaching the guidelines is not in itself a breach of Company Regulations, doing so persistently or flagrantly may be treated as a breach of Company Regulations and dealt with accordingly.

### "Code of Ethics for the Use of Electronic Mail"

**Forged Email.** No electronic mail may be sent so as to appear to originate from another person, with the intention of thereby deceiving the recipient or recipients.

**Menacing Email.** No electronic mail may be sent that is abusive or threatens the safety of a person or persons.

**Harassing Email.** No electronic mail may be sent such that a person or persons thereby suffers sexual, ethnic, religious or other minority harassment or in contravention of the Human Rights Act 1993. The charge of harassment may be based on the content of the electronic mail sent or its volume or both.

**Privacy of Email.** No person may access or attempt to access electronic mail sent to another user, without the permission of that user, except when necessary as part of that person's duties in respect of the operation of the electronic mail system.

**Privacy Act.** No electronic mail may be sent that contravenes the rights of a person or persons under the Privacy Act 1993.

### "Guidelines for Good Practice in the Use of Electronic Mail"

**Quoting.** An attractive aspect of email is the ease with which you can, when constructing an email message, use quotations from messages you have received. Good practice here includes:

- quoting only that part of another message that is relevant
- including enough context when quoting so that the recipient will not be misled as to the meaning or intentions of the person quoted
- attributing quotations to the person quoted
- not using quotations in messages to someone who was not a recipient of the original message, unless you have the permission of the original sender, or unless you can be reasonably satisfied that the original sender would not object to being quoted.

*(continued...)*

*("Guidelines..." continued)*

**Flaming.** The absence, in email, of the facial expression, tone of voice and feedback in face-to-face conversations, together with the speed of response that is possible with email, can lead to "flaming" and "flame wars". To avoid these, it is good practice:

- to avoid *ad hominem* expressions such as "you must be stupid if you don't understand that ..." or "only an idiot would think that ..."
- to allow yourself a 'cooling off' period, before responding to email that annoys you, and to be temperate in your response; you should be particularly careful if your response will go to more than just the original sender, e.g. to an entire mailing-list
- to make sure when appropriate, for instance by the addition of conventional symbols such as ":-)", that humorous remarks cannot be taken seriously

**Mailing Lists.** These provide an excellent mechanism whereby a group of people with a common interest or responsibility can communicate and share information. They are, however, open to abuse that can be annoying for the members. Good practice includes:

- only sending email to a mailing-list which is likely to be of interest to most of the members, or for which it is not possible to identify which members should receive the message
- in particular, not sending a reply to everyone on a mailing-list, when only the original sender will be interested in the reply
- not sending information to a mailing-list if one or more members of the list, for considerations of privacy, should not receive that information.

**Closed Mailing Lists.** These are lists that are not open to anyone to join, but are instead typically restricted to the members of a department, committee or other group with some joint responsibility. In respect of such mailing lists, good practice includes:

- not publishing or communicating outside the group, whether by email or otherwise, opinions and information conveyed within the mailing-list that was not intended by the sender to be for a wider audience.