Email Guidance

April 2014

HERIOT-WATT UNIVERSITY

EMAIL GUIDANCE

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Use of email by employees of Heriot-Watt University is permitted and encouraged where such use supports the goals and objectives of the University.

It can be easy to use email in a casual manner, however emails are published information and should be treated accordingly. The content, style and tone should always be deliberated alongside the frequency with which email is used. Consideration should also be given to the appropriateness of using email as a form of communication when a more suitable alternative may be an option.

Email has proven evidential value, both as a record of decisions and commitments (made on your own behalf and on behalf of the University) and as evidence in legal proceedings. Therefore, if email is the chosen mode of correspondence, the tone and content should be considered as carefully as when writing a formal letter.

Colleagues should ensure that all emails produced adhere to the University's values statement.

1. **LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

   - All emails are discoverable for a number of years - they are not an informal or temporary form of communication.
   - Email has the same authority as any other communication to or from our University and therefore requires the same standards of professionalism and courtesy.
   - Email should be regarded as 'published information'.
   - As a public body we are obliged to comply with the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act – therefore, a scenario could arise whereby you find yourself trying to defend the substance of an email written and sent today some years later, perhaps as part of a court case.
   - Emails are not confidential and can be read by anyone given sufficient levels of expertise.
   - Binding contracts can be inadvertently created via email, therefore please apply the same attention to detail you would apply to any written communication.
   - Take care with the language and tone used in emails; it is easy for written communications to cause offence or for messages to be misinterpreted.
   - Defamation of colleagues or other parties can take place over email. Abrupt, inappropriate and inconsiderate use of language can lead to a bullying tone can cause offence to others, even if it may not offend you, the sender.
   - Intensive use of email and unnecessarily wide broadcasting can lead to information overload and can stress colleagues who are trying to keep up with the number of emails received.

2. **ETIQUETTE**

   2.1 **Make sure that email is the right communication tool for the job**
      - Always consider whether your question or information could be communicated over the phone or face to face.
      - Email may seem to be a replacement for other forms of communication, but it can be limiting. If you need an immediate response, think you'll have a lot of follow-up questions, or need to convey a complex topic, email is unlikely to be the best option.

   2.2 **Be concise**
      - People are extremely busy and may get numerous emails a day, therefore a concise

email is easier to digest and is more likely to elicit a prompt response. A short message is also easier to read if your contact is checking email on a smartphone or other device.

2.3 Communicate 'action steps' first, not last
- It is standard practice to begin an email by summarising what happened at a meeting or during a phone conversation, then following on with any action steps that emerged. However, this may result in the most important information being missed. By listing action steps first, you draw attention to the items on which you wish to receive a response.

2.4 Include a deadline
- This helps individuals integrate the tasks into their schedule. If a response from them is imperative, politely include a deadline: "For the project to stay on track, I need a response from you by 1/10." If a response is optional, communicate that as well: "If I don't hear back from you by 1/10, I'll proceed with the solution I've proposed."

2.5 One message, one topic
- Don't mix unrelated questions or responses into one message. Not only does this increase the chance that some of your questions or responses may get overlooked, but it prevents the recipient from filing messages about different subjects into different folders.
- Some email conversations will naturally lead to other topics. In such cases, it's helpful to change the subject line of your email message to capture the new topic. This lets the recipient know the topic has changed and makes it easier to find the message when you're searching for it later.

2.6 Avoid space-consuming footers, pictures and attachments
- Do not send emails with large pictures or data-intensive footers attached; the large size of these types of extra features can cause mailboxes to fill up quickly and reduce the efficiency of the email systems.

2.7 Specify who should respond
- Group emails can result in the assumption of all recipients that someone else on the list will handle the request. Therefore, if you send an email to a list or group and require a response, make sure you specify who in that group is responsible for following up.

2.8 Use 'cc: field' sparingly
- Try not to use the 'cc: field' unless the recipient in the 'cc: field' knows why they are receiving a copy of the message. If using the 'cc: field', make sure the recipients know who is supposed to act on the message.

2.9 Never 'reply all' (unless absolutely necessary)
- If you receive an email sent to a large group of people, only reply to the person who sent the email, as they will be the person who will collate responses. If using the 'reply all' feature seems necessary, it is possible that having a face-to-face conversation may be the better and more efficient option.

2.10 Use 'FYI' for emails that have no actionable information
- Some emails need to be shared for information, but non-actionable correspondence

should be labelled as such so that it can be prioritised accordingly.

2.11 Provide a summary when you forward an 'FYI' email

- If you forward a message or a whole conversation thread you can't assume that the recipient will take the time to read it all and work out what it is regarding, or that they'll do so without any misunderstandings. Therefore, it would be helpful if you write a brief summary of the message or thread.

2.12 Inform colleagues you intend to respond, but later

- If a colleague sends you an urgent email that you can't get to today (or this week, or this month), write them a quick note to let them know, specifically, when you will get to it. You'll quell their anxiety and save yourself a future follow-up email from them. It also preserves goodwill; explaining now why you won't get to something straight away is more effective than apologising later.

2.13 Use expressive and compelling subject lines

- The subject line is a key place to indicate importance and time sensitivity, using leaders like "FOR APPROVAL:" or "SCHEDULING REQUEST:" or "FYI:" to indicate what action is or is not needed. It's useful to think of subject lines like newspaper (or blog) headlines – they should be expressive and compelling.

2.14 Maintain an appropriate, professional attitude

- Do not allow your email to become personal when addressing work issues.

2.15 Never send an angry or contentious email

- Do not send messages when angry or upset as this can agitate an already difficult situation. Email is a limited medium when it comes to conveying tone, thus angry emails can create more anxiety (and more email). If there is an area of conflict, a conversation in person or on the phone is best, as emails leave too much room for misunderstanding.

2.16 CAPITALS CAN BE MISLEADING

- Sending emails with the body of the message written in CAPITALS can make the content seem angry or aggressive. Ensure you use the appropriate case when writing your messages.

2.17 Avoid using URGENT, IMPORTANT and high priority option

- Only use these types of words in an email or subject line if it is absolutely necessary. If you do so, it should be preceded by, or followed up with, a phone call or face to face conversation.

3. **INFORMATION GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY**

3.1. Emails are records

- Email has evidential value, as records of decisions, agreements and commitments made on behalf of the University and must be managed accordingly to help us uphold our rights and meet our obligations.

3.2 Use University email systems for University business

- Use your Heriot-Watt email account for all email you send on university business, for security and business continuity and to confirm who you represent and your contact

details. Be aware that if you use your personal email account to communicate for work, these emails are also legally discoverable e.g. in response to Data Protection or Freedom of Information requests or litigation.

3.3 Save important emails to shared records systems
- Save important emails where they will be accessible to colleagues who have a business need to see them. University records retention policy is based on the value of the information as a record of University business rather than format in which it is held. The University's records retention schedules set out what information needs to be kept, for how long. Delete ephemeral or out-of-date emails as soon as they are no longer required.

3.4 Good housekeeping
- Organise your emails by moving incoming and outgoing messages into subject-related folders. You can set up a folder structure in your Inbox which mirrors the key folders in your shared drive. You can also use Rules in Outlook to automate filing by sender, keywords, subject, etc.

3.5 Send links rather than attachments where possible
- Consider whether you need to attach documents to emails. Sending an email with a link to a document on a shared drive or Intranet group site could be a better option than sending an attachment, which takes up space in an inbox. If you need to send an attachment, identify the version number, date and status of the document e.g. whether it is a draft or approved; this can be crucial when dealing with a complaint or litigation.

3.6 Don't mix business and private communications
- Avoid mixing business and private email. If you use a University email account for any personal messages, create a 'Personal' folder, and transfer all such email (both received and sent) into this folder.

3.7 Protect confidential information
- Be security aware. Email can be intercepted by persons who are not the intended recipients. If you have to send confidential information by email, encrypt or protect the data with a strong password and telephone the recipient to give them the password. Avoid emailing the password.

3.8 Check before you press 'send'
- Check your recipient's email address before you press the send button. Most breaches of security arise from inadvertently sending emails to the wrong people.

3.9 Beware of phishing
- A number of staff have reported phishing scams. Hackers are sending very plausible emails to users which purport to come from banks and building societies, PayPal, HMRC etc.

- Some phishing emails may even claim to be from IThelp@hw.ac.uk. If in doubt, you should call extension 4045 to verify before acting.

- Falling for these scams can result in your accounts being accessed, university files being infected with malware, reputations being compromised, to name but a

few. The emails could be pretending to come from anywhere.

- If you think you have received a phishing email don't:
    - click on any links
    - supply any personal information, usernames, account numbers, passwords or PINs
    - reply to the email or try to contact the senders
    - supply any information on the website that may appear (if you have clicked a link in the email)
    - open any of the email attachments

- If you receive a phishing email into your @hw.ac.uk email please report it to: abuse@hw.ac.uk

- Information Services have sophisticated automated systems in place to try to intercept suspicious messages, and regularly prevent many attacks, however hackers continually evolve new mechanisms to evade known remedies, and some equipment is not covered by IS central management procedures. Therefore, we all need to be continually vigilant.

4.   THE VALUES

At Heriot-Watt, we have an established set of values that help us to nurture innovation and leadership, and show our commitment to continuous improvement and development in all our activities.

Our values describe our deeply held beliefs and our community spirit. They characterise not only how we are as a higher education institution but also frame how we want to be.

Our values are:
- Valuing and respecting everyone
- Pursuing excellence
- Pride and belonging
- Shaping the future
- Outward looking

As a learning, living and working institution, we use our values as the building blocks of how we go about doing our work and how we conduct ourselves as part of Heriot-Watt University. They represent what binds us together as a University community and help us to become the best at what we do.

5.   FURTHER HELP AND ADVICE

For more information and advice about any aspect of this guidance please contact:

Sue Collier
Director of Governance and Legal Services
Heriot-Watt University
Edinburgh EH14 4AS
Telephone: 0131 451 3522
Email: S.Collier@hw.ac.uk

Mark Adderley
Director of Human Resource Development
Heriot-Watt University
Edinburgh EH14 4AS
Telephone: 0131 451 3447
Email: M.D.Adderley@hw.ac.uk

Ann Jones
Head of Heritage and Information Governance
Governance and Legal Services
Heriot-Watt University
Edinburgh EH14 4AS
Telephone: 0131 451 3219
Email: A.E.Jones@hw.ac.uk