Digital Communication
Best Practices

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- Describe key elements of effective digital communication
- Identify tools and techniques for email management
- Propose norms for digital communications in your department/workplace
Format: Workshop
- Overview of best practices
- Discussion of applicability in your environment
- Reflect on potential changes - personal and departmental
Discussion
Characteristics of Effective Emails
Characteristics of Frustrating Emails
What we know about email (and other digital communication tools)

- There are an estimated 5.2 billion email accounts; 220 billion emails sent per day.
- Healthcare provider use: consults; communicate with patients; collaborate on scholarly projects; perform administrative duties; and conduct routine communication.
- E-mail technology also expands the scope of telemedicine, allowing for remote consultation, radiographic assessment, and patient care.
- Digital communication skills are vital.
- Guidelines exist for physician-to-patient e-mail use; limited evidence-based guidelines addressing the use of e-mail among healthcare teams.
- Familiarity does not equal professional mastery
  - Easy to blur the lines between personal and professional.
“The total time taken to respond to an email is often MORE than the time it took to create it.”

- Chris Anderson, the Email Charter, 2018

This phenomenon can be thought of as a potent modern tragedy of the commons. The commons in question here is the world’s pool of attention. Email makes it just a little too easy to grab a piece of that attention.
Positives

- Rapid
- Easy to use
- Environmentally friendly
- Inexpensive
- Improves patient care

Challenges

- Too much
- Inefficient for complex cases/discussions
- Mis-matched urgency
- Reduces face-to-face interactions
- Security
- Level of formality
Perception of emails = Perception of sender

- Study of 32 Orthopedic Surgery Residents - impressions of emails

- The key negatively endorsed features of the e-mails included the use of
  - colored backgrounds (84%), difficult-to-read font (83%), lack of a subject header (55%), opening salutations without recipient names (50%), or no salutation at all (42%).

- The senders of negatively endorsed e-mails were perceived by participants as
  - inefficient (p0.03), unprofessional (p 0.001), and irritating (p 0.007).

- E-mails with overall positive endorsements were significantly more likely to have the participants perceive the e-mail senders as
  - Professional (p 0.001), pleasant (p 0.048), and kind (p 0.059).

- The participants were 2.6-fold more likely to respond immediately when they perceived e-mails as favorable compared with disliking them (42% vs 16% of responses, respectively, p 0.001).

So, what do we do?
# Solutions/Tips: Writing an email

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Use clear, meaningful subject lines | • Use clear, meaningful subject lines  
  • Consider subject prefixes/keywords, e.g. [INFO]; [ACTION]; [URGENT]  
  • Remove leading meaningless notation, e.g. EXT, FWD, Re:Re:Re  
  • Consider phrases like “EOM” (end of message) |
| Keep email short - 5 sentences or less | • Keep email short - 5 sentences or less  
  • Get to the point immediately  
  • If more information is needed, break into Summary/Details  
  • Avoid background colors, patterns, all capitals, and unusual fonts.  
  • Avoid unnecessary attachments (e.g. logos) |
| Do not ask open-ended questions unless necessary - give options | • Do not ask open-ended questions unless necessary - give options  
  • Spell out your need for acknowledgement; if received, acknowledge quickly  
  • Use if... then... statements  
  • Reply to questions clearly (inline, different color, preceded by initials)  
  • Assign tasks specifically  
  • Highlight lack of need to respond (NNTR, FYI) |
## Solutions/Tips: Writing an email

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Say what you mean (and only what you mean)</td>
<td>• Don’t send emotionally charged e-mails; consider a direct conversation for complex or sensitive topics.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transmit protected patient data cautiously</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Avoid humor that may be misinterpreted.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Proofread each e-mail for proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Solutions/Tips: Managing your inbox

<table>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limit Access</td>
<td>• Check email episodically during the workday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Avoid or limit email access during non work hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Write now, send later</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The approach of inbox as to-do-list misprioritizes newer emails as more important and results in missing tasks not captured in emails”

-Armstrong
Solutions: Changing Culture

- Agree on norms/best practices
  - https://tedchris.posthaven.com/help-create-an-email-charter

- Leaders model good email practices
- Reject 24/7 email expectations
- Encourage truly disconnecting
- Reduce unnecessary mass emails
What about other tools?
My team’s digital communication

What’s working?
What’s not working?
What might you want to try to implement?

Group discussion/activity
References

- Railey, Kenyon MD; Tuttle, Brandi MSLIS; Weiss, Jasmine MD Are You SURE You Want to Send That? A Model for Email Professionalism in Medical Education, The Journal of Physician Assistant Education: December 2017 - Volume 28 - Issue 4 - p 205-209 doi: 10.1097/JPA.0000000000000165
- Osman, Hassan. Don’t Reply All: 18 Email Tactics That Help You Write Better Emails and Improve Communication with Your Team. 2015.