

What Every Admin Should Know About Email

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a long history of involvement with Linux and open source, and has also worked for Novell as the openSUSE community manager. Brockmeier is a recovering technology journalist, and has written for ReadWriteWeb, Linux.com, LWN, Linux Magazine, NetworkWorld, ZDNet, and many others.

I'm regularly taken aback by how far computers and computing have come since I started futzing with computers in 1995. The tools available today are *astounding* compared to what I was using in 1995.

One of the minor exceptions, of course, is email. Yes, email clients have improved in the past 18 years, but not by a lot. The basics are pretty much the same.

Sadly, not only has the software failed to evolve significantly, people's use of email has largely not improved since 1995, either. Actually, its use has degraded significantly in the interim. By that, I mean that what was widely regarded as "good netiquette" in 1995 is largely disregarded by folks sending email in a corporate setting. That's a pity, because what was good practice in 1995 is still best practice today, though perhaps for different reasons.

For instance, sending large attachments via email used to be considered a no-no to because many folks would be connecting via dial-up. Really, really slow dial-up. Today? We may all have super-speedy Internet at home, but when we're on the road? Not necessarily. Spotty mobile coverage, lousy hotel Wi-Fi, and ridiculous data roaming charges for international travelers are all good reasons for users to consider the size of their messages before sending.

Because we all spend, literally, hours every day corresponding with people via email, how others send email is not just a matter of preference; it's actually a difference of "you're making my life easier" or "you're making my life harder."

Work vs. Personal Mail

Note that this list is related to email exchanged in a work setting (including open source developer mailing lists where work is being done) and not personal email. What's appropriate for casual, one-on-one conversations is different from what's appropriate for productive conversations.

For instance, if someone top-posts a response to "Can we meet for the movie at 7 P.M.?" it's really no biggie. Top-posting that requires a recipient to scroll backwards through a six-message conversation trying to figure out what the hell the conversation was about is just rude.

We all know top-posting is evil, but there's more to good email etiquette than not top-posting:

- ◆ **Don't shotgun emails.** Just because a person has more than one email account, it doesn't mean you should send a piece of mail to all of them. Pick one. Otherwise you're just creating a mess the other person has to clean up twice.
- ◆ **Avoid CC'ing people in emails to a list.** Some lists and/or mail clients are configured so that hitting Reply will send a note to the original sender rather than the list. Others are configured to send mail just to the list. In as much as possible, if you're

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having a conversation on a list, don't also CC individual users to whom you may be replying directly. They don't need two copies of the message.

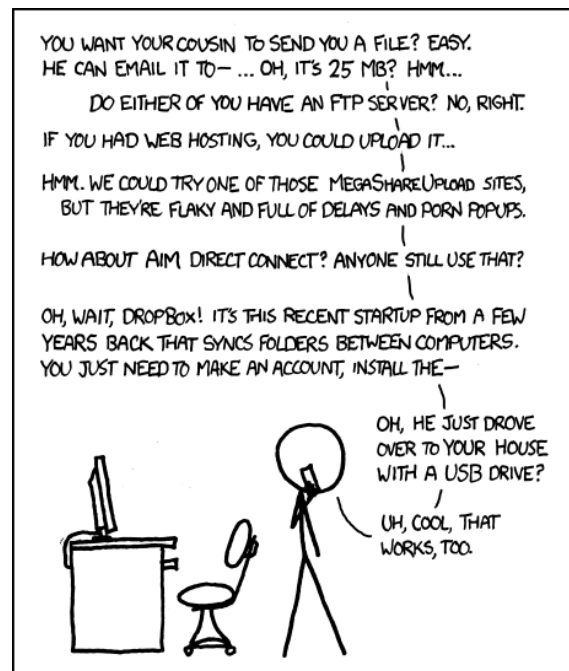
- ◆ **Use meaningful subject lines.** When you compose an email, try to make sure the subject is useful to the recipients and descriptive of the message you're sending. If it's a short message, you can even put the entire thing in the subject and put "[EOM]" afterwards.
- ◆ **If the topic of a thread changes, change the subject.** This goes back to long email threads on the corporate side, or long discussions on the -dev lists for projects. You start on Topic A, but mid-way through the discussion, someone decides to bring up Topic B, which is totally unrelated or only quasi-related to the topic at hand. This means that people skimming email have *no clue* that the thread with the subject about the first topic has changed to something relevant to them. Or, equally annoying, a topic they *were* interested in following has now devolved into something else entirely. (This can also be known as attempting to hijack a discussion.)
- ◆ **Don't just reply to an unrelated message to send an email.** This one drives me *bonkers* because I'll try to arrange my inbox by conversation, and an email about one thing will be buried in a long-dead conversation about something totally unrelated.
- ◆ **Trim your mails.** If you're replying to one sentence in a 3,000-word email, cut out everything but the sentence you're replying to and reply to that.
- ◆ **Don't use HTMLized email.** Yeah, I'm a crusty old Linux guy and still use the Mutt client to read a lot of my email. For far too many reasons to go into in this article, I despise HTMLized email. (Again, work. Personal use? Whatever makes you happy. But it doesn't belong in a professional setting.)
- ◆ **Have a signature.** Have an email signature, preferably one that gives a clue who you are, and perhaps other methods of reaching you. Keep it short, though. Under no circumstances should you include a bunch of logos or images in your signature. (See above about "don't use HTMLized email.")
- ◆ **Drop the legal boilerplate.** A footer on your email telling someone how to handle your message when they haven't agreed to your terms is not likely to be enforceable. It's doubly annoying when the footer is longer than the message itself.
- ◆ **Avoid surprise CCs.** Generally, adding someone to a discussion without announcing it is rude; however, there are exceptions, for example, when the original sender specifically requests that other relevant parties be added if necessary.
- ◆ **Avoid improper use of CC.** If you need to send a blanket announcement or forward to a bunch of people, use BCC instead of CC. I don't want 20 follow-up replies that are totally irrelevant to me just because people blindly click "Reply All."

- ◆ **Use Reply All sparingly.** The corollary to the above rule is to think before hitting Reply All. Do *all* the people in the discussion need to see your reply? Maybe, but think twice.
- ◆ **Do not reply to digests.** Frankly, I am against allowing digests for mailing lists, but they're probably here to stay. If you want to lurk, fine, have fun. If you wish to reply? Do *not* reply to a digest, especially without changing the subject to be appropriate or trimming the message so that everyone else has to slog through a day or week's worth of email to read your reply to *one* message in the bunch.
- ◆ **Follow instructions for using mailing lists.** People who reply to a mailing list with "unsubscribe" instead of following the instructions clearly printed in the footer of about 98% of mailing list messages should be deprived of computer access for at least a week.

I could go on. And on. Using business email boils down to being considerate of others in your communications. I understand, for instance, that top-posting is perfectly reasonable for a two-word reply sent from a phone. It is not, however, a reasonable approach when replying to a lengthy email with a likewise lengthy reply addressing multiple parts of the email.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have a bunch of email to process.

xkcd



I LIKE HOW WE'VE HAD THE INTERNET FOR DECADES, YET "SENDING FILES" IS SOMETHING EARLY ADOPTERS ARE STILL FIGURING OUT HOW TO DO.

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