

FIND Finance and Accounting Jobs Now

Jobs [Advanced Job Search](#)
[View UK Jobs](#) **NEW!**

Or let the great jobs find you.

[UPLOAD YOUR RESUME](#)

Excel At The Job Jun 10 2010

Email Best Practices for the Workplace

By Toddi Gutner



The April release of internal emails at [Goldman Sachs](#) about the firm's successes during the 2007 subprime mortgage mess highlights an increasing need for employees to learn email ethics and policies.

A poorly-worded email can easily "result in liability for a company, and of course, damage a company's reputation," said Bennet Alsher, partner at Atlanta-based Ford & Harrison LLP, a law firm that specializes in labor and employment law.

Emails are increasingly being used by plaintiffs' attorneys in a variety of lawsuits. In 2009, nearly 25% of large U.S. companies reported that employee email had been subpoenaed in the past 12 months, according to a survey by Proofpoint, a provider of solutions for email security and data-loss

prevention.

The lesson: "Don't put anything in writing that you don't want the whole world to see," said Keith Crosley, director of market development for Proofpoint. Not only are emails not private, but they are also permanent. "Emails are basically indestructible, like cockroaches," said Alsher.

Nearly half (48%) of U.S. companies surveyed with 20,000 or more employees have staff to read or analyze outbound email, according to Proofpoint. When companies find problems, they often take action. More than half of the companies surveyed disciplined an employee for violating email policies in the past 12 months and 31% terminated an employee for violating email policies in that same period.

As employees have become more comfortable with email, they have also become much more casual in how they use it. The issue, in part, has to do with the psychological mindset the individual has when they write an email, said Naomi Baron, a linguistics professor at American University. "We tend to write as we speak and, like speech, [we think] it's gone -- no one keeps a record of it," she said. What's more, because employees consider their workstations "their computer," they may also think the message itself must be private.

The Ground Rules

The bottom line, experts say, is that everyone -- from an administrative assistant to a chief executive officer -- "should always keep in mind that the email could be made public, and be aware of an email's potential for harm both to the company and the employee," said Nancy Cornish Rodgers, an attorney specializing in employment at Denver-based Kisinger & Fellman PC. Companies need to set clear expectations in employee handbooks and follow through with appropriate discipline for violations.

When using email consider the following guidelines:

-- Email is for business, only. If you are using your company computer and your company email, it should not be used for personal matters. Most Wall Street firms subscribe to the Bloomberg Terminal, a computer system for financial professionals. This system also has an email component. Employees should use this system only for business issues, such as discussing projects, reporting trades, or arranging meetings, said Susan P. Ascher, founder and chief executive officer of The Ascher Group, a human-resources recruiting firm.

-- Communicate clearly and carefully. Finance professionals, such as traders and portfolio managers who use email to verify prices of stocks and bonds, need to ensure that the information they send is accurate. Even though there are disclaimers at the bottom of many Wall Street firms' emails, a hastily-sent email could be detrimental to the firm.

Text-style writing isn't quite as clear as it should be. In other words, the message "C U later" can have an impact on how the recipient of the email perceives the sender, and thus the business. Business-letter and email-message writing are a needed skill but have become a lost art.

"In addition to training employees on email policies, businesses should invest in more business-writing training," said Marsha Egan, a business leader coach. "Skillfully written emails can give the business an advantage," she said. In communicating clearly and carefully, employees need to be very mindful of what they say and how they say it.

-- Be professional. Don't write or send an email when you're angry or emotional. If you're upset, consider waiting 24 hours.

When you need to write an important email, do it in your word processing program, then cut and paste it into the email.

"The public will perceive a flippant email comment, an insensitive reaction to a situation, or an overzealous statement as a blemish on the company's reputation, even if it comes from a 'renegade' individual employee," said Cornish. It can be difficult to rein in successful traders, accustomed to taking large risks, and get him or her to understand the need to craft an appropriately worded email.

-- Consider the telephone. "When considering writing an email on a sensitive topic, don't write the write email," said Egan. Pick up the phone instead. If there is a possibility that the email will be misconstrued or misunderstood, it will be. "Email messages are one-way communications, not dialogues, although many people try to make them dialogues," she said. When dialogue is needed, pick up the phone.

The world of finance -- seen by the public as mysterious and nontransparent -- may need to be even more careful with its email communication than other less-prominent industries. That may be due, in part, because Wall Street already suffers from the public's lack of trust. Whether or not that is actually the case, the lesson here is to err on the side of writing less, rather than more.

Write to Toddi Gutner [here](#). Make sure to include the title of the article in the subject line of the email.



MOST Popular Articles

Career Strategies

- 1 [Cover Letter: Crafting the Perfect Finance Cover Letter](#)
- 2 [Resume: The Perfect Sales and Trading Resume](#)
- 3 [MBA: Making the Most of an MBA Internship](#)
- 4 [Interview Tips: Six Questions Accounting Job Seekers Should Ask](#)

Finance Career News

- 1 [Cranking Up the Lobbying Machine](#)
- 2 [Six Best Investing Books for 2010](#)
- 3 [Morgan Stanley to Double Private Bankers in Asia](#)
- 4 [Merrill, Morgan Up the Ante for Brokers](#)

TOP Finance Jobs

Most Viewed Jobs

- 1 [Finance jobs - Cost Accountant, - Mergis Group](#)
- 2 [Finance Jobs - Senior Auditor I, - Bank of America Corp.](#)
- 3 [Finance jobs - Senior Financial Analyst, - Mergis Group](#)
- 4 [Finance jobs - Investment Banking Analyst / Associate, New York, NY - Credit Suisse](#)

Featured Jobs

- [Senior Annuities Learning Consultant/Sales Trainer, Prudential Financial Inc. Shelton, CT](#)
- [VP Strategy, Thomson Reuters New York, NY](#)
- [Investment Consultant Manager - Long Island, NY, Citigroup Inc. Plainview, NY](#)
- [Senior Risk Analyst, Canon Financial Services Mount Laurel, NJ](#)

Jobs of the Week

Finance and accounting jobs featured in **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**.
[Find a Great Job →](#)