

The Media Center: *You've Got [too much] Mail*
Mary Alice Anderson
Lead Media Specialist
Winona Area Public Schools
Winona MN
Multimedia & Internet@Schools, March April 2009

Much has changed since we enjoyed the 1998 romantic comedy starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. Falling in love over the Web is no longer unique. We no longer race to our computers if “mail call” rings or Eudora chimes. Educators have stopped discussing whether or not to give students email accounts on the district web site; we now assume they have their own. It’s no longer “do you have an email?” It’s now “Which account should I use when I write to you?” We’ve all go too much mail and without careful management, we can find ourselves confused and spending too much time sorting it all out.

A very tech savvy and competent organized person arrived at a meeting two hours late; an administrator person sent out a message about a very interesting learning opportunity with a subject heading designating a long-past event; another emailed a message with an ambiguous subject heading announcing an event that sounded like a scam. A distant colleague invited me to a social event but in the rush to get the message out did not include the day. Recalling these recent snafus and what often seems to be a communications breakdown in many institutions and organizations, it may be appropriate to address our overflowing email boxes here.

I have four accounts; one for my district job, one personal, and two for online teaching work at two universities. I love and use them all. If I don’t heed my own advice email can be unwanted. What’s a busy educator to do? A few tips, along with a few illustrative anecdotes, follow.

Suggestions for recipients

- Treat email as you would much of the paper mail you receive. Reply immediately, toss it, or set it aside to deal with later.
- Reply, even if it’s just to reply with “Done,” “Got it ” or “I received your message and will get back to you shortly.” Almost all messages deserve a courteous acknowledgement.
- Use the delete key when you know the message does not deserve a personal response or is truly just junk. At least look at the subject heading so you don’t miss something important.
- Set your preferences so that deleted messages are retrained in the trash until you empty the trash. This ensures that a message accidentally deleted is still available and can be restored if necessary.
- **Really read** the message you do open and read. I received a reply on December 9 from a person who wrote, “Sorry I missed the meeting yesterday; please send me any information I missed.” The message she received was about a meeting scheduled for January 8!

- Create folders for received mail you want to archive. Folder titles should make sense to you and may even correspond with your paper filing cabinet. Folders may even include mail you want to reply to later. For example, the folder could be titled “To do.” Most email messages use a miniscule amount of storage space so there usually isn’t a storage problem. If your folder list gets too long embed folders in other folders.
- Use Spam and other filters. But check your filtered folders now and then. Sometimes legitimate emails end up there.
- Use the tools provided with your email system for mark messages as read or replied to or those that are of high priority.
- Check your mail regularly, on a schedule that works for you so that let the inbox pile up. Reading and responding two-three times a day is not too much to expect for those of us who spend much of our time working in the communications and support side of education.
- Periodically review your in box by sort by sender/date/subject, just in case you missed something.
- Be careful about forwarding anything. If you must, briefly explain why and what.

Suggestions for senders

- Be brief and concise. Address the topic at hand to help ensure that your message is read.
- Use very clear subject headings. Include the date/time/location in subject headings that announce a meeting or deadline. Instead of writing “Department meeting” write “Department meeting, February 10, 3:00 p.m., John Doe’s Office.”
- Modify the subject heading if you are replying but with a slightly different emphasis or focus.
- Make messages that are more than a few sentences long easier to read by double spacing between paragraphs, Use formatting option in the text. For example, use colored or bold fonts to emphasis dates and times or important ideas. Save important messages that you sent in specific folders rather than just in the SENT folder. It will be easier to retrieve it later if necessary. Learn who is likely to ask you later about something you sent earlier.
- Use “Reply to all” and “Blind CC” *very judiciously*; it’s just too easy to send the information to the wrong person or clutter other people’s in boxes.
- If you do not want a document shared with others indicate “personal and confidential” in the subject heading. Include a “Please do not share or forward” in the message body. I learned this lesson the hard way when a staff development project-planning document I submitted to an administrator was taken as the “real thing” and forwarded to those I was going to invite to the event. No real harm was done, but there was unnecessary confusion.
- Save yourself time by setting up groups and bulk mailing.
- Don’t unnecessarily use attachments for information that can just as effectively be sent in the body of an email. The recipient will appreciate your help in adding one more file to his or her download box. I regularly receive agendas for committee meetings. I much prefer those that are in the body of the message rather than those that are unnecessary attachments which clutter up my downloads folder. Brief text that doesn’t require special formatting can just as easily be put in the body of the message.

- When it is necessary to send an attachment create a PDF file if you want the your document stays intact.
- Use *Google Docs* to hare files that require collaborative input. *Docs* provides an easy to follow revision history and ensure there is just one copy of the document.
- Model good email etiquette when you reply to a person who has not followed it. If the writer is long-winded write a brief, but polite response. If the send used a vague subject heading (or worse yet, no subject heading), include a topic specific subject heading. Be upbeat and polite.
- If you have multiple accounts decide which one you will be used for what. This will help the recipient recognize you as the sender and help you stay organized. Last spring I accidentally sent a reply to a person inquiring about “ABC” from an account I should have used for a person who inquired “XYZ”. That was my mistake. The sender’s error was writing about an online class from a personal account rather than her university account. Both of us got confused.
- Be aware of your district’s Acceptable Use Policy and its provisions for the use of email for both professional and personal business.
- Take the time to write hand-written notes and send out printed communications now and then. People appreciate getting something special in their physical mailboxes now and then. Printed invitations, thank you notes, and words of praise are especially nice to receive in old-fashioned print form.
- Use the phone – not voice mail – when you really need to know or confirm something.

Ideas for the staff developers and others who help their peers.

- Don’t assume that everyone knows how to use the system to its fullest potential. For example, people may not know how to set their own preferences, utilize shortcuts, and create folders to create archive files, or use special features such as the calendar or groups.
- Become very familiar with all the features of your “in house” mail system and teach others about them. We recently upgraded our district email system. One of our teacher tech coaches held a staff development session and was surprised by the questions she received.
- Help staff become aware of district email policies and guidelines.
- Teach others about options such as Gmail or other web based, free services they can use as an alternative to their work account or an account that isn’t offering quite what they need to be efficient and effective communicators.

A *Google* search presented me with over 7 million hits on the topic “managing email” just for 2008. Many articles address needs far more complex than those the average educator, but are still practical. Google “managing email” yourself to acquire more ideas for staying sane in our overly connected world.

Internet Movie Data Base, “You’ve Got Mail,” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0128853/>, Accessed December 14, 2008

Productivity 501, “10 Articles on managing email,” <http://www.productivity501.com/10-articles-on-managing-email/1077/> Accessed December 14, 2008

Mary Alice Anderson is a contributor to professional journals and available as a conference and workshop presenter. She is the Lead Media Specialist for Winona Area Public Schools in Minnesota and is an online adjunct instructor with the Online Professional Development for Educators Program in the School of Education at University of Wisconsin—Stout. She is also an adjunct instructor in the Library Media Education Program for Minnesota State University-Mankato teaching/ She received a Top Online Educator recognition from SurfAcquarium. Her personal Web site can be found at <http://www.homepage.mac.com/Maryalicea/Sites/Anderson/Anderson.html>. Communications to the author may be sent to maryalicea@mac.com.