

The logo for Switchvision features the word "switchvision" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The "vision" part is slightly larger and more prominent. To the right of the text is a blue graphic consisting of several overlapping circles and a bright light source, creating a lens flare effect.

switchvision

Dynamic Interpersonal Skills Training for Technical Experts

Breaking the Email Backlash

Alison Kemp

(alison@switchvision.co.uk)

Switch Vision Limited

10-14 Accommodation Road, London NW11 8ED, England

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7183 4300 Fax: +44 (0)844 583 4511

E-mail: askus@switchvision.co.uk

Web: www.switchvision.co.uk

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Does this make steam come out your ears?

3 Tips to Make Communication Smoother



So many times, communication between people can break down simply because of how they're using emails.

Ignoring how we use virtual communication when we look at relating to others, is like trying to run a car with a flat tyre: it'll go but not very efficiently.

These three tips will keep that car away from the relationship breakdown garage, helping smooth the communication.

1. *Irritation One:* the words 'should': For example, 'You should let me know when you have authorisation for this and then I will action the request'. Similarly, replacing that with 'have to', which is even stronger, may start to annoy your recipient.

It could be seen as: patronising.

The Recommendation: replace 'should' and 'have to' with 'You'll need to' or 'I'd strongly recommend that...' This is easier to hear and act upon. It means the same without sounding like a bossy parent.

2. *Irritation Two:* presumptuous wording such as 'As you know...' then adding totally new information that is unknown to everyone, but should have been known.

It could be seen as: someone protecting themselves

Recommendation: writing, 'As you may know...' and sticking to possibilities unless you can be certain.

3. *Irritation Three*: cc'ing in the boss, because you can't get what you want from a colleague.

It could be seen as: trouble-making

Recommendation: If the communication is breaking down, go and see someone to get their advice. Usually, two adults should - excuse me - need - to be able to work it out between each other by saying:

- a) what needs to be done and, perhaps, why the current situation could be problematic
- b) who will do it
- c) finish with 'As soon as you have this, I'll be happy to help you'.

If the tone is constructive and respectful, there is less chance of getting into an email battle.

The etiquette of copying and blind copying (cc. and bcc)

When to Copy (c.c.)

Copying others in on emails maintains the loop of information and spread goodwill.

Example One:

Let's the owner of an international company, Jackie, asks Maurice in the UK to organise a sales conference in Portugal, where Jackie is based.

Maurice will email his team for information that needs to be given to Jackie and when he sends the email to her, he'll cc. his team into the message so that they know that he's given the information to Jackie, and she know that everyone knows what's happening.

Example Two:

You write to a customer service portal to thank them for their service and copy in a senior manager so that they can also see that you're happy with the staff. This is beneficial for everyone.

When to Blind Copy (c.c.)

Bcc. This is more for when you need to hide information from the main recipient so it should be used ethically. This will cover few situations but may include, in business, contexts such as the one below

Example One: Joe in HR gives a written warning to Sam for constantly being late into work and leaving early. He may choose to blind copy in Sam's manager, Victor. Victor will then realise that HR has taken action but Sam. This way, HR are not drawing Sam's attention to the fact that Victor is aware of this. They may want to limit the paranoia that Sam already feels. This is a matter of choice with the alternative being to simply cc. Victor into the email, since it's all a transparent matter anyway.

Example Two: You've been offered a bribe by a supplier and write back rejecting it, blind copying in your senior managers so they realise that this supplier's offer has been refused. Again, many would argue that if the supplier is going to be so underhand, why not have it out in the open and cc. in all concerned parties?

How to Piss People off in Emails

Here's how:

1. Ignore requests.
2. Don't address the sender when you reply. Just go straight into the message, or miss out the salutation.
3. 'Shout' at them.

1. Dealing with requests – 'Holding Emails'

Imagine you're seeking information or clarification on something, so you fire off an email and nothing comes back. You wait a day, maybe two. Perhaps even a week later, zilch. Silence. What are you thinking? It's a bit like being ignored. Actually, completely like being ignored and maybe you are.

Now, let's look at this as if you're the recipient. The sender may have requested copies/PDFs/figures/data etc and you just can't get round to it at the moment. It's really not the most important task on your 'to do' list. What with seeing clients, meetings, collating data for someone else blah, blah, blah, and there's another 102 emails in your inbox that you have to sort through.

So, this is where 'holding emails' come in. Personally, I lerrrrvvvvve them. Here's why:

- they're a way of making sure the sender knows s/he is on your radar and attention will be given to their needs;
- the recipient still gets to maintain task priorities.



Buy time with a Holding Email

So here's an example of how you'd write a holding email:

"Thanks for your email, Guy. I can collect the data that you need for Friday. Will that be OK?"

I know, holding emails aren't exactly literary masterpieces. You don't need to do an MBA to learn this but so few people write such vital messages.

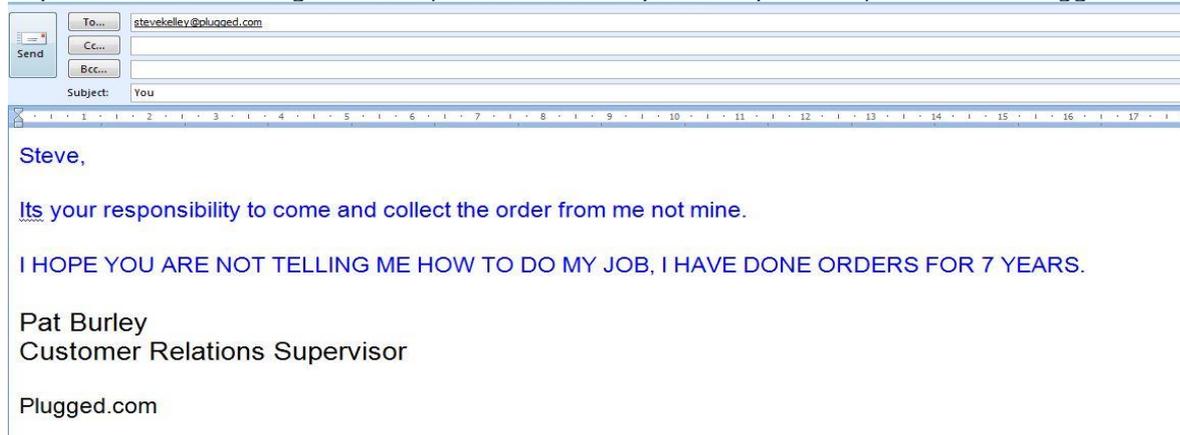
Chances are that the suggested day will be fine. If not, you can negotiate another time before someone throws a wobbly/their laptop at you. Habitually ignoring requests from colleagues will mean that you're not a 'go-to' person and this will undermine their trust in you. The benefits of sending a holding email are as follows:

1. it shows you know how to manage your time;
2. you appreciate the importance of the requests of others and can balance these against your own priorities;
3. you can be trusted and this helps build respect and team cohesion;
4. when you're in need of a bit of assistance, it's more likely to come your way, rather than brushed under the carpet.

As you can see, they're so simple and beneficial to both the recipient and author that there's no reason why you can't do them as soon as the moment arises.

2. Not addressing the recipient or avoiding a salutation

If you received message like this, would it strike you as diplomatic, assertive or aggressive?



Oh dear, Pat, did you get fired from Charm School?

I've changed names to protect the guilty. For your information, the slightly edited real message from a completely different company was the subject of a complaint about the author's email etiquette, which resulted in her being fired for angering so many people.

Goodbye, Pat, or, to adopt Pat's style, 'OFF YOU GO, PAT.'

Notice, how she starts with no salutation: 'Hi' would have been fine if she was too angry to manage a 'dear'. Then, she goes straight in like a bomb.

No names are OK – sometimes

If you're in an ongoing conversation on the same topic with an individual, we now often treat this as an Instant Message (IM), and go straight into what we want to say, rather than start with a greeting.

This is now considered normal. Do remember though, that if you're starting a new topic with the same person, begin with a greeting, which of course, should include the name of the recipient.

So no plain, 'Hi!' but 'Hi, Michael!' (Obviously, not Michael if that's not their name!).

In a slightly longer email, mention the name again at the end. It gives the recipient a lovely warm glow of love in a completely professional way, of course, in the sense that there's something more personal and direct about being named at the beginning and in the body of an email.

If you want something done, what better way than to have rapport because we're more likely to do something for someone we like.

Even if you were to put the pressure on, I'd still use the person's name at the end as it makes the message more direct, more personal.

3. Using CAPITALS

WHY DO PEOPLE STILL DO THIS!!!! DON'T YOU KNOW IT'S RUDE TO SHOUT!!! THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY I'LL HEAR CAPITAL LETTERS IN YOUR EMAILS...SHOUTY, AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR BY SOMEONE WHO'S LOST CONTROL! AAAAAGH!

You can assert yourself through the power of direct and courteous language. If you need help, hey, you know where I am. SO JUST GET IN TOUCH! (or 'just get in touch!')

So now, you can look forward to being able to avoid those misunderstandings with 'tone of voice' in emails.

Your Emails Just Kill Me!

'Hi Alex,

You haven't given me the dates yet for when we're meeting. Let me know this week, please.

Alison

This email may seem rather too direct for some people, OK for others and a few may regard this as extraordinarily polite: there is a 'please' there, after all!



With 'padding' you can make your message easier to receive.

How direct we can be with others depends on the following:

culture: some nationalities are generally more direct than others;

context: maybe I've sent you 3 emails for the dates and you still haven't got back to me;

status: am I your boss, your supplier, your colleague, a trainee?

personality: there are people you know who just 'say it as it is', and you can let it go. That comes down to

trust: trust in the fact there's no animosity behind the words. You don't take it as a 'stab'. Or you simply trust that they wouldn't be so upfront unless there was, what you consider, to be some fairness there.

All this would depend on how well you know others and this could mean some trial and a couple of 'errors'. Regard that as feedback and modify if it's going to make a working relationship too difficult.

The Directness Thermometer

The Anglo-Saxon culture represents an email minefield for both natives and non-natives and even us Brits need to learn the art of 'padding' or softening requests, making them less direct.

However, be aware that 'padding' could seem non-committal in other cultures, so being more direct would mean that you actually get your requests fulfilled rather than brushed

aside. So here's a padding temperature gauge, starting with the most direct and progressing to the most polite

Oy, give me that document now.

Oy, give me that document now, please

Give me that document now, please.

Do me a favour. Give me that document.

Could you please give me that document?

Would you be able to give me that document?

Can I ask you to give me that document?

(Despite the wording, you ARE actually asking for the document, not asking if you can ask for it. This is typical of an Anglo Saxon indirect request)

May I ask you to give me that document?

Would it be possible to ask you for that document?

Please, would it be – perhaps – possible that a chance may exist at some convenient point that you may be so kind as to give me that document?

(At this point, you're on your knees, begging to a psychopath who has electric probes pointing at your head. You're begging. Review the relationship!!)

There's much reading between the lines in certain cultures such as Anglo-Saxon and South-East Asian countries. In his book, 'Beyond Culture', Edward Hall defines cultures such as the Japanese and Chinese high -context cultures.

One of the characteristics of such nations is that reading between the lines needs to be a common practice. These nationalities aren't as literal, as 'out there' as cultures like the U.S or Germany, which Hall would define as low context.

How to Read Between the Lines

The Anglo Saxon culture can be a particular nightmare as it straddles both the high and low so here's a short guide as to the (possible) meanings behind the words:

1. Maybe I didn't make myself clear
= You've misunderstood/You're wrong!
2. I do need to emphasise/Following my email (below)
= How many times do I need to TELL you?!/As I've told you...
3. Interesting. How do you see me using this?
= Why are you sending me this? Seems useless to me.
4. This may be perceived as (risky/unusual)..
= The client will think you're (an idiot/going mad...)
5. I wasn't aware of any changes.
= What changes! I seem to have lost my crystal ball.
6. May I request you to do this now?
= Do this now. You should have done this yesterday.
7. We'll need to revisit the costings.
= What a rip-off! Do I look like a mug?!
8. I'm not sure I can see you tomorrow.
= I can't see you tomorrow.

Rules for the calibrating directness:

1. Instead of blaming others with a finger-pointing 'you', the Brits would tend using the passive form (no person) as in no.4 or use 'I' as in number 2.
2. If there's a problem to be solved, especially in negotiations, we' would be more likely, as in number 7.
3. We'll pad for requests as in number 6.
4. Substitute 'Why?' for 'What would be the reasons for...' or 'How do you...' as in number 2.
5. Brits may use modals of probability such as 'may/may not' or phrases such as 'I'm not sure that I can...' as in number 8 instead of saying what they mean: 'I can't..'

Pick up the Phone

There are those who seem very off-putting in their email communication because they can't see the effect their style is having or they *hear* their words differently to how the recipient is playing them back in their heads.

I know a delightful woman who is always irritating others with her email style. No, I'm not being sarcastic. She really is a lovely person but because she doesn't know *how* to word her requests, she sounds aggressive. Face to face, you get a completely different impression.

Tread carefully when you need to and you'll be able to get your point across clearly without sacrificing the relationship (unless you want to, of course..). Do note, though, that sometimes the easiest action to take, if you do find yourself in a battle of words and wills, is to pick up the phone.

More often than not, hearing the intonation behind the intention will help both parties realise that an over-reliance on virtual contact may not be too constructive.

Three Small Ways to Write Emails that People Act Upon

If you want people to reply to your emails with more speed, then use the following pointers in your messages and get rid of those 'chase up' flags!

1. Write Specific Titles

Make sure the title matches the subject and is specific. This email below is not specific enough:

This message has not been sent.

Send

To... stellaartois@pipers.com

Cc...

Bcc...

Subject: our meeting

Jock Mackie

Stella may have 3 meetings so when she sees Jock's email, she may be confused as to which one Jock's referring.

Now compare this email heading, where Jock's been very specific about the subject so Stella will instantly know which meeting is being mentioned.

This message has not been sent.

Send

To... stellaartois@pipers.com

Cc...

Bcc...

Subject: 3pm Paris systems meeting tues

Jock Mackie

2. Keep Subjects Separate

It's much easier to respond to subjects when you send each one in a separate email.

If you combine subjects in emails, there's more risk of them being 'buried' and ignored. To mitigate this, and to make it easier for you to keep track of where you are with each issue, allot a separate email to different subjects.

3. Give the right amount of information

One of the reasons why no one replies to your email, is information overload. On the other hand, too little information and the receiver can be left in the dark.

Some people want detail, some just the basics. The safest action here is to:

1. keep your points succinct and short;
2. ensure your points are numbered and well space, making it easier to scan information;
3. **highlight important points with a space above and below in addition to emphasising with the use of a different colour.**

If you need to provide extra information, you can:

- offer a meeting/call
- provide an attachment, giving those who want to 'drill down' the opportunity to get the detail.

5 Rules to Reverse the Email Spiral

<http://emailcharter.org/>

1. Respect Recipients' Time

This is the fundamental rule. As the message sender, the onus is on YOU to minimize the time your email will take to process. Even if it means taking more time at your end before sending.

2. Quash Open-Ended Questions

It is asking a lot to send someone an email with four long paragraphs of turgid text followed by "Thoughts?" Even well-intended-but-open questions like "How can I help?" may not be that helpful. Email generosity requires simplifying, easy-to-answer questions. "Can I help best by a) calling b) visiting or c) staying right out of it?!"

3. Tighten the Thread

Some emails depend for their meaning on context. Which means it's usually right to include the thread being responded to. But it's rare that a thread should extend to more than 3 emails. Before sending, cut what's not relevant. Or consider making a phone call instead.

4. Attack Attachments

Don't use graphics files as logos or signatures that appear as attachments. Time is wasted trying to see if there's something to open. Even worse is sending text as an attachment when it could have been included in the body of the email.

5. Cut Contentless Responses

You don't need to reply to every email, especially not those that are themselves clear responses. An email saying "Thanks for your note. I'm in." does not need you to reply "Great." That just cost someone another 30 seconds.

Replying to multi-layered emails

Replying to emails that are layered with queries and the need for clarification can be tedious. Responding 'in line' is the quickest way of doing this. You may start by replying to the email, as follows:

From: Alison@switchvision.co.uk

To: evelyn@wearehippos.com

Hi Evelyn,

Thanks for your email. Responses are below in red.

Please don't hesitate to contact me, if you've any questions.

All the best,
Alison

From: Evelyn@wearehippos.com

To: Alison@switchvision.co.uk

Dear Alison,

We've received your order for the 1000 t-shirts but have a few questions. Firstly, I'm not clear whether you wanted the short sleeved or long sleeved version. **Short sleeved please.**

We've also started to make cotton and there's a thicker fleecier one on the long-sleeved as well so please let us know which one you'd like. **Cotton would be great.**

There's a 7 working day delivery time or you can have the Express delivery. The Express is a 24 hour turn around at £9.50 or £5.00 for the standard 7 working days. **I'd like the Express.**

Many thanks again for your custom and I look forward to hearing from you soon. **Thanks!**

Best regards,

Evelyn