E-mail and text messaging are popular forms of personal and professional communication, offering users a method of relaying information in a quick, efficient, and inexpensive fashion. Mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, optimize these forms of communication by allowing users to send and receive messages via e-mail or other mobile applications from virtually anywhere. According to an Ericsson consumer insight summary,

...23 percent access the internet via their browsers, and 24 percent check their mail.

Before the use of smartphones became commonplace,

consumers tended to use the internet in ‘chunks’—they would tend to confine their internet activities to when they had an opportunity to sit in front of a computer.

Often, electronic communication, data transfer, and file storage occur in “the cloud,” which is a set of services and technologies that enable the delivery of computing services over the Internet in real-time, allowing end-users instant access to data and applications from any device with Internet access.

The cloud can be used in two ways, for cloud computing and cloud storage. Cloud computing involves using software that is not installed on your computer or mobile device. For example, Gmail is a popular e-mail client that does not need to be installed on a personal computer or mobile device for use; instead, it relies on the cloud, which allows the user to access and manipulate the same information from any device that has an Internet connection. In contrast, Microsoft Outlook, another popular e-mail client, must be installed on your computer for use. Cloud storage involves storing files in a location that is not on your computer or mobile device. For example, DropBox is a popular file sharing program that does not need to be installed on a computer or mobile device and can be accessed from virtually any device with Internet access. Facebook is an example of a site that uses both cloud computing and cloud storage. Users update and interact with information on Facebook without ever having to download a Facebook program to their computer or mobile device. It is all handled within the cloud.

With these new technological conveniences, it is essential that users understand and practice not only safe computing practices, but also proper electronic communication etiquette. We have all heard the saying “treat others as you would like to be treated,” but how does that apply to electronic communication? Etiquette is a set of rules for proper and polite behavior. Electronic etiquette or “netiquette” refers to the rules for the proper and appropriate way to communicate using an electronic device or activities online. This article addresses the concept of netiquette and tips...
for ensuring that electronic communication is handled in a proper and appropriate manner.

**BASIC E-MAIL ETIQUETTE TIPS**

E-mail provides users with documentation of conversations and a means of convenient communication when a telephone call or face-to-face interaction is not possible or desirable. It is important to remember that, even though e-mail is convenient and quick, there are certain rules that should be followed to ensure that your message is communicated in the way you intend. E-mail messages do not allow for facial expressions or tone of voice to help communicate a message, so it is very important to choose words wisely and format the text appropriately. Following are some tips for preparing an effective e-mail message.

**Use Proper Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling**

Although it is common to use abbreviations, acronyms, and creative spelling while sending text messages (ie, “texting”), these shortcuts should not be taken when writing a professional e-mail.

Taking the time to ensure that you use proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling can mean the difference between a message that is clearly understood and one that is misleading or unintelligible. The following examples illustrate this point:

- **Poor use:** we r seeing a consistent problem with sterilized instruments coming back not cleaned right have recently discovered three maj abd sets 2 plastik instrument sets and 2 drills cleaned b4 sterilization still contami-nated w/ tissue debris we need 2 address ASAP RU available Fri 2 figure out where breakdown hapning

- **Recommended use:** We are seeing a consistent problem with sterilized instruments being returned to sterile processing that have not been properly cleaned. We have recently discovered three major abdominal sets, two plastic instrument sets, and two drills that were improperly cleaned before sterilization (ie, still contami-nated with tissue debris). Obviously, this is something that we need to address as quickly as possible. Are you available to meet with me on Friday to go over the instrument handling process to figure out where the breakdown is happening?

**Avoid Overuse of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

Abbreviations and acronyms are a great way to shorten words or phrases (eg, an organization name, commonly used term) in text to make a message or document easier to read. It is important to remember the message’s audience, however, because an abbreviation that may be commonly used within your organization

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**Glossary of Terms**

**Cloud:** a set of services and technologies that enable the delivery of computing services over the Internet in real time, allowing end-users instant access to data and applications from any device with Internet access.1

**Emoticons:** “a textual expression representing the face of a writer’s mood or facial expression. For example, :) , :(. and :D. They are often used to alert a responder to the tenor or temper of a statement and can change and improve interpretation of plain text.”2

**Netiquette:** rules indicating the proper and polite way to behave while using an electronic device or engaging in communication or activities online.

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may not be commonly used at another facility or organization. For example, it is common for AORN staff members to use the abbreviation “PI” when referring to our weekly newsletter Periop Insider; however, this may not be easily understood by someone outside of AORN’s walls.

**Limit Use of Emoticons**

Although emoticons (eg, :-) are used heavily in personal text messaging, they may not be appropriate for use in a professional message and may take away from the formality or authority of the message you are trying to convey. Always consider your audience before adding an emoticon.

**Do Not Overuse the High Priority Option**

Flagging something as a high priority (eg, by checking the “!” in e-mail) is an effective way to let the recipient know that he or she should read and respond to the message as soon as possible. This option should be reserved for messages that are, in fact, a high priority. Consider the children’s story about the boy who cried wolf. If you flag messages as high priority when they are not really a high priority or flag messages this way on a regular basis, the impact of the selection will become reduced. As a result, recipients may not view your future messages as important, regardless of the flag. So, reserve the high-importance flag for messages that necessitate the recipient to read and act on the message as soon as possible.

**Use Bullets to Break Up Long Messages**

Bullets allow you to call attention to several items or questions for discussion. As shown here, the use of bullets will allow the recipient to

- easily distinguish individual items and
- address each item or question separately.

**Avoid Using All Caps**

In the electronic world, using all capital letters (“all caps”) is the same as screaming. So to type an entire message in all caps is the equivalent of yelling the entire message at the recipient.

- A MESSAGE LIKE THIS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO READ AND IS OFTEN PERCEIVED AS AGGRESSIVE, AS THOUGH YOU ARE SHOUTING AT THE RECIPIENT. USING ALL CAPS FOR MESSAGES IS NOT RECOMMENDED.

- A message like this is much easier to read and has a more respectful feel compared with a message in all caps.

Capitalization CAN be used to add emphasis to a word in a section of text. This should be done sparingly and, when available, alternative formatting options (eg, bold, underline, italics) should be used to provide the emphasis instead.

**Use a “Signature” With Your Contact Information**

Although e-mail is a quick and efficient mode of communication, sometimes it is necessary to pick up the telephone and call the person for additional clarification or to better understand the tone of the message. If you are corresponding with someone with whom you do not normally talk or who may not have your contact information readily available, then your signature line could provide him or her with the necessary information, including an office or mobile telephone number, a fax number, a business address, and a web site. To set up your signature by using Outlook, select “Options” from the “Tools” menu on the top navigation bar. Next, select “Signatures . . .” from the “Mail format” tab.

If this is the first time you are setting up a signature, you will need to add a new signature in the “Select signatures to edit” box at the top, left-hand side of the text box. To do this, select “New” and type in the name of the signature (eg, Jennifer Brusco), then “OK.” To edit the signature, select it from the “Select signature to edit” box and begin typing the signature information in the “Edit signature” field. You can customize your signature by adjusting the font size and type in this field as well. When complete, select “OK.”
Your signature will now appear on all outgoing e-mails that you create.

**Use Appropriate Greetings**

Always begin your e-mail with an appropriate greeting. For example, “Hello,” “Greetings,” “Good Morning,” “Good Afternoon,” or “Good Evening” are all acceptable greetings for professional communications. If you decide to personalize your e-mail by including the recipient’s name (eg, Dear Dr Jones), be sure that you have spelled his or her name correctly and have included the appropriate title (eg, Dr, Mr, Mrs, Ms, Col, Professor).

**Introduce Yourself and Include a Meaningful Subject Line**

If you are writing an e-mail to someone for the first time, take a moment to introduce yourself (eg, your name, job title or function). A simple introduction can prevent a “who is this person and why are they contacting me” response from your recipient. Subject lines also help the recipient quickly discern what the e-mail is about and prioritize the message.

**Avoid Sending Sensitive Information via E-mail**

Although e-mails may be deleted, they can always be retrieved, especially in a business situation. Most organizations run backup programs that can restore deleted information, which means that the message you or your intended recipient deleted can be restored at a later date, potentially revealing sensitive information (eg, username, password) to someone you may not want to have it. Also, use caution when sending personal messages via a business e-mail address (eg, an unflattering e-mail about a coworker) because your e-mail could be forwarded to others. It is important to craft your message carefully and reread your e-mail before sending it with the understanding that it could be viewed by multiple people.
With this in mind, try not to forward another person’s e-mail without his or her permission.

**Avoid Overusing the “Reply All” Feature**
If you need to have a back-and-forth conversation with someone via e-mail about a specific subject, it is best to do so with just the one person without copying everyone on the original e-mail. If you believe the resolution of your discussion is important for the group to know, then send the resolution to the group members but leave them out of the debate unless their viewpoints are essential.

**Use the Out-of-Office Assistant**
If you are going to be away from e-mail for more than a day or two (eg, on vacation), you should set up your out-of-office assistant to let anyone trying to contact you know that you are unavailable and whom they should contact in your absence. Following are instructions for setting up an out-of-office message when using Microsoft Outlook.

- **Step 1:** Select “Out of Office Assistant” from the Tools menu on the top navigation.
- **Step 2:** Select “Send Out of Office auto-replies.” You can set the time frame for the responses in one of two ways.
  - Type in a message for inside the organization and one for outside the organization. When you select “OK,” your messages will be sent immediately to anyone trying to contact you. These replies will continue until you manually access the out of office assistant again and switch the selection to “Do not send Out of Office auto-replies.”
  - Select the box for “Only send during this time range.” This allows you to customize the delivery timing of the messages, automatically turning them on and off at preselected dates and times.
Step 3: Enter your out of office message. You may opt to have a different message for internal versus external messages. Do not forget to include contact information for someone within your organization who could answer questions in your absence. In some cases, you may want to include your cell phone number for emergencies, but this will depend on your personal preference for giving out this information.

Step 4: Select “OK” to confirm your selections.

**ELECTRONIC ETIQUETTE BEYOND E-MAIL**

Presenting yourself professionally via e-mail is an effective way to maintain your credibility and convey important information to key parties. E-mail is not the only form of electronic communication that should be handled with proper etiquette, however.

**Customize Your Voice Mail Greeting**

Just like e-mail, you will want to set up your telephone voice mail greeting to let callers know when you will be away from the office for an extended period of time. This message should include the dates that you will be unavailable and a contact person, if possible, to address any urgent matters. There may be times when a professional client or colleague calls your cell phone. For these situations, you will want to opt for a professional or, at the very least, appropriate voice mail message.

**Refrain From Having Loud Conversations**

Whether you are talking on your cell phone or landline telephone, you should always try to keep your voice volume at a reasonable level. It is easy to forget that others can hear you when you are in the midst of a telephone conversation; however, talking too loudly may be distracting to your coworkers and viewed as disrespectful to those
around you. Additionally, personal conversations may not be appropriate for all environments (e.g., the workplace). If you need to have a personal conversation, ask the caller if you can call him or her back at a more appropriate time or find a location that is more private to discuss your personal information.

**Avoid Texting During Other Interactions**

When someone is talking to you, they expect to have your full attention. By texting while the person is talking—whether on the telephone or in person—you are telling this person that what he or she has to say is not important to you. Because texting has become so common, people often read and answer text messages without thinking. However, you should always do your best to show your respect for the person you are speaking with and refrain from texting during these interactions.

**Pay Attention to Signs That Discourage Cell Phone Use**

Many businesses have signs that indicate where you may or may not use your cell phone or other mobile device. These signs are intended to give you the autonomy to curtail your mobile device use. If you ignore these requests, you are displaying disrespect to the business owner and other clientele.

**CONCLUSION**

The advent of mobile technology has allowed users to communicate virtually instantaneously with friends, colleagues, and loved ones. Keeping in mind the golden rule of treating others as you would like to be treated can mean the difference between conveying a message that is understood and meaningful or conveying a message that is misunderstood and personally or professionally damaging. Before you send an e-mail, answer a
telephone call, text, or communicate via other
electronic modes, consider how you want others
to receive your message. Following the tips sug-
gested in this article could help you communicate
more effectively and avoid some common
netiquette blunders.  

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