SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Do You Present a Professional Image?

By John West Hadley

Elsewhere in this issue of *The Stepping Stone,* you will find a useful checklist of dos and don'ts for email. I'm sure one could easily come up with a similar list for the now-ubiquitous text messages.

We often think, *"I'm just dashing off a quick message, so everyone will understand if there's a minor error in it."*
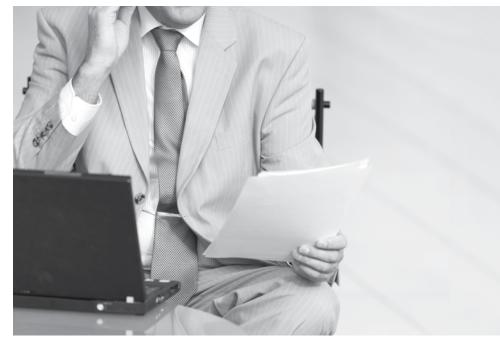
Maybe, maybe not.

What signal does it send if you send an important contact something with an error in it? If it was truly a situation where time was of the essence, then that contact is likely to be forgiving. On the other hand, if the message wasn't time-sensitive, and you just didn't bother to re-read it before hitting send, that's going to send a very different signal.

I don't claim to be perfect in that regard, either. Typos and bad auto-spell corrections are a reality of life, and I have made my share of them. At one point, my daughter's phone seemed to be linked to a medical dictionary, so that when she wasn't careful, texts went out with references to body parts. You can imagine how mortifying she found that.

However, arguably the most important contributor to career growth is the professional image you project. The reports you draft, presentations you make, emails you write, posts you put up and texts you send all contribute to that image. If you consistently take great care with those, then when you do make the occasional mistake, people will be forgiving.

If, on the other hand, you make little effort, many will interpret that you just don't care, and you will find yourself missing out on opportunities. And you likely won't even know about it, because rarely do we tell someone about the opportunity for which they aren't being considered.

Hopefully we all give a lot of attention to professional documents. However, we naturally tend to let down our guard when we're writing to friends and relatives, and this often spills over into emails to business and networking contacts and groups. But what impression are you making when a potential contact receives emails from you with typos, spelling errors or poor grammar?

One business contact used to send emails that were all bold, mixed capitalization, laid out all over the page with seemingly random indentation, with doubled exclamation points and question marks. The immediate impression was of someone who lacked written communication skills, and was clueless as to the impact of their messaging. Would you risk forwarding something like that to someone else you respect? Or even introduce that person with any form of positive recommendation that might backfire on your own reputation?

You might think that it's OK to post 'casual' notes to actuarial or other networking groups, to take short cuts in how you communicate, whether you bother to run spell check, etc. After all, we're all in the group to help each other, aren't we?

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... consider what happens when a potential hiring manager or powerful networking contact "Googles" your name.

But what signals are you sending to the 200, 800, 1500 people in that networking group when you do that? Haven't you just told them that they aren't important enough for you to take the time to make your message professional and error-free? And won't potential contacts assume that what you communicate in those 'unguarded' emails reflect your TRUE feelings? What does this do to your professional image, when these are the very contacts you are hoping will help you further your career or search?

Even if you aren't making THOSE mistakes, what about other signals you send? For example, would you be excited about reaching out to help the person who posted this note?

"Hello, I'm currently living in DC and looking for an actuary job. Anyone have any connections? Thanks."

Do you have any clue what sort of actuarial job he might be interested in or suited for? Plus, he doesn't understand that 'actuary' isn't an adjective. Or this one:

"I just recently moved to the Atlanta, GA area this week. I am searching for actuarial employment and if anyone know of any organization that is hiring, please feel free to share my attached résumé."

He expects everyone reading his note to do the work to read his résumé and figure out what he might be seeking or qualified for - how many do you think will even bother to open the attachment? (And he apparently didn't take the time to proofread such a short email, as it includes a typo.)

Attitude is critical. We are counseled to never badmouth past employers in interviews, and to avoid being negative about past situations. But what about in messages posted in blogs and networking forums? What conclusions might you draw about the person posting this message?

"The main problems with applying for jobs that one is overqualified for are: (1) they believe you are going to quit when something better comes along, and (2) they feel they have more power hiring someone who is more entry level. They don't want a knowledgeable person second guessing their decisions, even if the employee isn't going to say anything or try to grab power."

The first point is quite reasonable, but the second starts to reveal an attitude that many hiring managers would find objectionable. After reading this, wouldn't you be hesitant to introduce this person to influential people you might know?

Also consider what happens when a potential hiring manager or powerful networking contact "Googles" your name. Are some of those poorly crafted, error-prone or attitude-revealing postings going to show up in the search? If so, what damage have you just done to the professional image you are trying to present?

So make sure that everything you write (and do, wear, or say) sends a consistent, professional image. All it takes is one disconnect for networking contacts to have second thoughts about you! ●