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E-mail etiquette

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The Electronic Mail Association claims that e-mail connects 30 to 50 million people throughout the world and that those connections increase by 25% annually. Michael Legeros cites this claim in "Etiquette and E-mail: Rules for Online Behavior," in the July/August 1995 issue of *INTERCOM*, a Society for Technical Communication newsletter.

E-mail is a remarkable tool for communication. It is both efficient and effective in getting messages across to others. For only the price of a local phone call, e-mail users can send messages from one end of the globe to the other.

- E-mail is a public vehicle limiting anonymity to users. For example, people sending e-mail messages may, instead of using their real names, use first names, pseudonyms, or just electronic addresses to identify themselves. Consequently, the opportunity to abuse this communications medium exists.

Lately, e-mail users have discussed and written much about appropriate etiquette and civility when using this unique electronic medium. So, to promote and foster good online behavior, we offer the following for consideration:

1) E-mail is not private.
Use e-mail to send only those things that are not private or confidential. The Electronic Communications Privacy Act prohibits line taps, but it gives law enforcement agencies and employers the right to read and copy e-mail messages. E-mail is considered internal communications. The agencies or corporations paying for the e-mail system own all e-mail correspondence. Usually, their computer system managers will store e-mail messages, sent, received, and deleted on large capacity backup tapes for years.

The sender should never feel secure that e-mail will remain unread or untouched before it gets to its final destination. Receivers may forward e-mail to whomever they wish, without the originator's prior knowledge or approval. Therefore, e-mail is never private and sometimes may come back to haunt the sender or appear as evidence in a law suit.

2) Courtesy is vital.
Be prompt in responding to e-mail received. E-mail is a communications medium similar to a phone call. Like phone messages, the sender usually expects a prompt and courteous response. Also, it's good practice to refrain from snappy comebacks or witty comments that, without a voice behind them, can be misinterpreted as sarcasm. You can avoid misunderstandings by using acronyms such as <VBG> (very big grin) to show you're joking.

3) Short messages are better.
Keep e-mail brief and to the point. Short messages are considerate of the reader's time and are usually clearer than longer ones.

4) Be familiar with accepted "cyberspeak" conventions.
Users can combine abbreviations, acronyms, symbols, and words to convey meaning to the reader. E-mail users call this "cyberspeak."

- **Capitalization.** Messages composed in all uppercase letters "sound" harsh and usually mean that the sender is SHOUTING. Messages composed solely in upper or lowercase are difficult to read. Therefore, use uppercase letters only for emphasis.
- **Acronyms.** Acronyms are useful in abbreviating messages and speeding communication. However, unless the reader knows what they mean, they may be confusing. If using a less well-known one, spell out acronyms in the message on first reference.
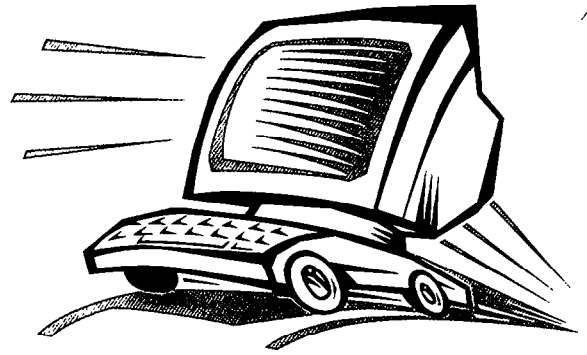
Some common ones are BTW (by the way), FWIW (for what it's worth), IMHO (in my humble opinion), ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing), TIA (thanks in advance), and BFN (bye for now).
- **Emoticons.** Emoticons are punctuation symbols used in combination and viewed sideways, appearing like little faces. The colon, with an open or closed parenthesis, looks like a smiling :-) or frowning :-(face . Other symbols include :-D for a laugh, :-@ for a scream and :-X for sealed lips.

Remember, use e-mail cautiously, send only those things you would not mind sharing with others, and practice the "netiquette" of responsible cyberspeak.

Actuaries Online update

by Peggy Grillot
SOA BBS Manager

Remember, forum messaging is separate from e-mail that you create outside the forum, although the same netiquette rules apply. Messages are created, posted, and responded to within a forum, such as Actuaries Online, the Society's electronic bulletin board service on the CompuServe network. To date, more than 25,000 messages have been posted since AOL began April 1, 1994. Currently, there are more over 1,700 subscribers from around the world browsing the 875 files found online in 17 library sections.

Messages are available immediately once posted and can be either