CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Who Are You Talking To?

By Douglas E. Welch

After writing this column for six years, I have received my share of e-mail from readers. This e-mail has come from both local readers and those farther afield, sometimes even outside of the United States. This has shown me just how far my words can travel, and it also drives home the importance of thinking about what you are saying before releasing it "into the wild." This is true whether you are writing for publication or just sending e-mail to a colleague across town. The global nature of the Internet ensures that your words might be available to readers far beyond their intended audience.

The Intended and Unintended

Whenever you commit your words to electrons, you must always be thinking of your audience. Even if you are just sending a quick note to a friend, your messages can be easily, even accidentally, forwarded to other people whom you may not know. Be careful about making disparaging remarks, off-color comments, or anything else that could be considered offensive by others. Your e-mail can become public in the blink of an eye.

While public e-mail can make your life difficult, it can also have disastrous effects on your career. Recently, an employee at one of my client sites found himself out of a job within minutes of a misplaced e-mail. He accidentally sent an e-mail discussing some work problems to the worst possible person, his boss. His boss quickly requested a meeting and they decided that it was best for the employee to leave.

While this is an extreme example, e-mail goofs happen all the time, with varying results. There is no way you can be absolutely sure of your audience, so it is best to remain as gracious and forgiving as possible when hitting the Send key.

The Public Forum

These same guidelines also apply doubly to any writing you place in a public forum. These forums can include e-mail mailing lists, Web-based bulletin boards and even manufacturer's support forums. Inaccurate or nasty messages can quickly make their way into the larger world, as they get passed from hand to hand. Even worse, the original content and context of the message can be distorted as it is passed from person to person.

The ubiquitous nature of the Internet also leads to further complications. It is not uncommon these days for managers, supervisors and job interviewers to use Internet search engines to turn up information on you and your past. (Very cool thing to warn about!) Public forums are some of the easiest places for them to find this information. Search engines, such as Google (*www.google.com*) can quickly turn up a wealth of information not only about your job history, interests and hobbies, but also other information that you might rather keep private.

In many cases, your online writing may be the only view that others have of you. Be sure that you are putting your best foot forward whenever you are writing. I am reasonably assured that if one of my clients "googled" my name, they would not turn up anything that could damage our working relationship. How can I be sure? In truth, I can't be 100-percent sure, but the fact is I have "googled" myself, so I have a fairly good idea of what anyone else might find.

As I was writing this column, I did a quick search in Google Groups (*http://groups.google.com*) to see what might turn up. Google recently included a fairly old archive of Usenet News messages in its archive, so I was interested to see what I may have been writing about in the past. It was quite a trip on the "wayback machine" for me. Long before the Internet was a commonplace part of many homes and businesses, I was sending messages to a variety of groups. The oldest message I found was from 1989, nearly 13 years ago. If this doesn't impress on you the longevity of your online communications, little will.

It is an important part of high-tech career management to constantly be aware of what you are saying about your clients, your co-workers and yourself in a public space such as the Internet. As you have seen, online communications have a long life span and are easily searchable by anyone. If you don't pay attention, you might find yourself suffering from a less-than-successful high-tech career, without even knowing why. ❏

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