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Top 12 Be-Attitudes of Netiquette for Academicians

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Why Netiquette?

The term *netiquette* is the abbreviation for "network etiquette." It is derived from two French words: "*net*," meaning "bucket," and "*iquette*," meaning "of doilies." It's not new, dating back to 1983, but it certainly deserves the attention of both veteran and newbie Internet users, especially academicians. Rules for corresponding on the Internet have been published in a variety of forms for nearly 30 years (see http://www.networketiquette.net). Some rules are for general use, but others are directed at businesses, social networking, and even online courses, teleseminars, and Webinars.

After sifting through several "buckets" of lists, I extracted a dozen *attitudes, behaviors, actions, and intentions that seem to be appropriate for most professionals*, but, especially, those who hang in the hallowed halls of higher heducation reading my lame alliteration in this sentence. My sifting was prompted by a few abuses I have observed over the past year on e-mails, listservs, blogs, and social network comments, particularly in LinkedIn "group" discussions. These professionals should be smacked with a whisk broom.

You probably know and practice all of the rules in my list. They're based on common attitudes, courtesies, and appropriate professional behaviors in the workplace. The central message is, in fact, a "Be-Attitude": Be a "mensch" (a Yiddish word, meaning literally, "Nobel Prize winning personality"). Actually, it's a person with integrity, honor, and a sense of what is right.

The problem is that there are professionals who are not as sensitive to these "Be-Attitudes" as you may be. Not only is incivility and bullying spreading in the academic workplace, but many of those behaviors also manifest themselves in communications on the Internet. Cyber-bullying is on the rise. If this top-12 list raises the consciousness level of just one bully, then this article was a waste of my alliteration—a total failure. I'm hoping for at least two.

Top 12 Be-Attitudes

1. Be Sure to Use Appropriate Professional Language

Avoid the following forms of communication:
(a) smiley faces and other "social" symbols (save them for Facebook),
(b) Web jargon,
(c) unfamiliar abbreviations,
(d) negative comments about anybody,
(e) put-downs based on age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other characteristics,
(f) off-color, inappropriate jokes, and
(g) offensive language or topics, such as sarcasm, ridicule, profanity, vulgarity, and sexual innuendo.

Such coarseness in language and content demeans the level of discourse and the discourser, of course. Professional standards apply. Your writing should be that of a professional, not a teammate in the locker room or buddy on a social network. Casual attire does not mean casual language.

So what are the consequences? If Google detects your use of "blue material" or any inappropriate language, your Website, YouTube video, blog, wiki, or other network (platform, media, site, etc.) may be demoted in the search engine ranks or removed by the owner of the network. Directors or owners of listservs, blogs, social media sites, YouTube, and professional LinkedIn groups may also delete you as a member or put out a contract on you to cease and desist the evil material.

2. Be Careful to Use Proper Grammar and Spelling

Chek adn thowroughlee pruf-reed alll mesags. Use SPELCHEK! Don't hurry to hit the "Send" button. This applies when you e-mail, tweet, text, blog, face, goog, wik, or some other three to five letter communication. Although, we are all our own worst proofreaders, try to

let your message sit for a while, at least a minute or two, but a day is best. Seeing it again totally cold often makes the errors jump off the screen. Wait for this jumping. Also, read it aloud. Listening to the words and flow may catch errors and, maybe, even improve your writing.

Your writing ability and the care with which you produce any written product will be reflected in your messages, comments, and blogs. Send only your best work into cyberspace. Your meticulous care in proofing your messages becomes part of your reputation. Anything less may come back to bite you in your butt-tocks.

3. Be Brief and Precise in the "Subject" Line

What you type in the "Subject" line of any message will determine whether it gets read, deleted outright, or mistaken for spam and then deleted. That line conveys the importance of your e-mail or other correspondence. It should be short, accurate, relevant, and informative of the content in your message. General words or phrases usually say nothing about the message. Be specific. With the hundreds of e-mails faculty and students receive every day, unless your line stands out and says "This is important; please open me," you will be deleted with all of the other meaningless lines.

Better yet, consider using the "Subject" line as your message. For short e-mails, such as "Thank you very much" or "You're a knucklehead and I never want to see you again," use the "Subject" line and end with the acronym "EOM," which stands for "end of message." The recipient won't need to open the e-mail and it will speed up the e-mail review process. Of course, he or she will respond with an e-mail, asking: "What does 'EOM' mean?"

The "Subject" line can also be used to communicate the urgency of your message. As an alternative to clicking the exclamation point, put URGENT: or FYI: at the beginning of the line so the recipient can triage time-sensitive and important e-mails quickly.

4. Be Honest and Truthful

Don't even think about faking and misrepresenting anything. If you lie or even streeetch the truth in what you communicate, especially your signature line and online profiles on your Website, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google, YouTube, or any other network that displays your credentials, your career will hang in the balance. Be truthful in everything you say (and do). Professional credibility is almost impossible to regain once it's lost. Who will believe you? Dishonesty can be a "career breaker."

If you use humor in your writing, as I do frequently, make sure your readers know you're joking. Most professors and students, in particular, interpret everything they read seriously, unless they are familiar with the source as a jokester. Also, be careful with the types of humor you use. Don't even consider put-downs, sarcasm, or any of the offensive material described in number 1. Self-effacing jokes are usually the safest.

5. Be Respectful of Copyrights

Unscrupulous ninnies are stealing information off of every imaginable cyber-source without permission or credit. Even several of these ninnies stole one of my blogs and parts of others. Despite the initial feeling of flattery to the author, the act of claiming someone else's material as your own without credit is reprehensible. Plagiarism is out of control.

As academicians, you're trained APA style-wise or, perhaps, in Chicago or AMA style to cite your sources in ALL of your writing. Do the same online. Make sure to get permissions and/or acknowledge sources when appropriate, even Wikipedia. DO NOT swipe any material—print or nonprint media.

As a contributor to the Internet, you also need to protect your intellectual property. For the consequences of violations and guidelines on how to protect your work, check out my October 2009 blogs on "Copyright Infringement" and "Intellectual Property" (http://ronberk.blogspot.com). *Copyscape* can track down any of your posted work, articles, books, etc. that is stolen, plus it will identify the culprit. Then you can take the necessary action—legal or otherwise.

6. Be Sure to Use an Appropriate Signature Line

Do you have a signature line? If not, get one soon. They're on sale at COSTCO®. You need to identify who you are. If you are commenting on professional issues on listservs or in group discussions on LinkedIn, your credentials are important to colleagues who don't know you so they can evaluate the weight of your contributions. Your position and expertise provide a context for your messages.

Standard signature lines include name with degree, title or position, institution, address, phone, fax, e-mail, and Website. The URL links for additional business Websites, blog, LinkedIn, and other professional sites may be added. Some of you even end with a favorite quote. If the list appears too unwieldy, create different signature lines for different target readerships.

All of this information permits colleagues and potential employers or clients to contact you easily and assess your credibility (*NOTE:* Hackers already have your information.). Also, please fully identify the name of your institution; many colleagues may not know the acronym version, which may usually appear with your name. For example, if you are Director of the Alligator Rehabilita-

tion Institute (ARI) at Everglades University (EU), your recommendations on how to capture an alligator with asthma in your hot-tub are worth heeding. But please heed quickly.

7. Be Responsive to Requests in a Timely Fashion

If colleagues, known or unknown, or students request information from you, try to respond in a timely fashion, within 24 hours. If you don't have time to fill the request immediately, respond that you will get back to them by a certain date. That's just professional courtesy. Be empathetic.

Given the diversity in generations of both faculty and students, there are differences in the preferred means of communication. Consider the means before you respond. For example, Net Geners and GenXers frequently prefer texting or IM, while Boomers and Traditionalists use e-mail or pony express. The younger faculty and students perceive e-mail as appropriate for "older" folks and fuddy-duddies. Those youngin's usually acquiesce and use e-mail for the older faculty. Consider the person making the request and the most appropriate tool for your response.

In addition to internal communications, you may receive inquiries from all over the world, such as requests for information, a copyright permission, an article, research findings, resources, teaching opportunity, speaking engagement, a job, or to oversee and protect the shipment of a bazillion dollars from an African country by a desperate person of royalty. Respond promptly and appropriately. Everyone appreciates a rapid response. Again, it's your professional reputation on the line.

8. Be Cautious About When to Click "Reply to All"

Some people find the "Reply-to-all" response very annoying, usually because they don't care whether you're attending the party or meeting. When you receive an e-mail on a listserv or one that was sent to a bundle of colleagues and staff, think about who needs to see your reply. Then, think again, veeery carefully before hitting "Reply to all."

If your response is a substantive contribution as part of a group discussion thread, click "Reply to all" so everyone can benefit. For LinkedIn groups, there is no option; you can only click "Reply." If your reply is intended for the sender's eyeballs only or the sender is really the only person who requires your response, just click "Reply." If you click "you-know-what" instead, one or more of the recipients might hurt you. Your incorrect reply in this instance could result in an untimely accident, if you get my drift. Carefully weigh your options before clicking.

9. Be Thoughtful to Not Use ALL CAPS OR all lower case

Messages typed in ALL caps or grossly enlarged scripts are interpreted as cyber shouting, screaming, or yelling. It also hurts your eyeballs. DON'T DO IT! Caps and monster script are okay for heads or occasional emphasis. As an alternative, insert asterisks around *key words* or phrases to draw the reader's focus. Just don't overdo it. Also, do not type messages in all lower-case letters because it may be interpreted as not caring.

10. Be Respectful to Not Flame

Do not make or respond to personal insults called "flames" or pick a fight, attack, or disrespect a colleague for any reason at any time anywhere. Rudeness and nasty comments are rampant on the Internet. It is so much easier to insult someone in print than face to face, especially when you don't know him or her. With the rather spirited discussions on listservs and group member comments, don't be tempted to step over the line by insulting or harassing someone. When in doubt, don't hit "Send." Even better, don't comment. Remember what your mommy said: "~~Clean your room or I'll call your father.~~" "*If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all.*"

The tone of your written voice conveys the emotion behind your language. Your professional tone should always be respectful, courteous, polite, and friendly. The words you pick express your unseen facial expressions, vocal inflection, and "body" language. Resist the temptation to send any communication when you are angry. Before clicking "Send": (1) cool down, (2) reread the e-mail, (3) carefully reconsider the harsh or critical spirit of your e-mail, and then (4) rewrite the e-mail so it doesn't contain any language you will later regret.

11. Be Considerate to Not Multi-Post, Cross-Post, Off-Topic Post, or Hijack a Discussion Thread

If you send out an announcement, promotion, discussion question, or any other messages, please do not post on every group, network, or listserv where a large number of the same colleagues will receive it. For example, this overlap can occur between a professional listserv and several LinkedIn groups and subgroups in the same discipline. That overlap with repeated messages can be very annoying, even if you apologize upfront for cross-posting, which most people do. Be considerate with your posts.

Also, don't derail discussions with irrelevant comments or introduce a new topic. Stay on point with the flow of the conversation. Your contribution should keep it moving forward. Introduce a new discussion if your thoughts are different from the current thread.

12. Be Careful to Not Forward Inappropriate Jokes, Cartoons, Photos, Chain Letters, or Spam

Be very careful with attachments or any other material that are not of the professional kind. If they look suspicious, don't open them and hit "Delete." If you know the source and you open the material, inspect it. If it's off-color, potentially offensive, or inappropriate for professional consumption, delete. Do not forward unprofessional material or spam to colleagues and students.

As a humorist, I often recommend that faculty, staff, and students send each other "appropriate" jokes, cartoons, pictures, and video clips for stress relief and possible class or conference presentation use. The operative word here is *relief*. No it isn't. It's *appropriate*. The humor can serve important functions, but it must be handled by a trained professional; it should not be attempted at home by rank amateurs.

Summary and Final Thoughts

Summary

Here's a recap of the top 12 "Be-Attitudes":
1. Be sure to use appropriate professional language.
2. Be careful to use proper grammar and spelling.
3. Be brief and precise in the "subject" line.
4. Be honest and truthful.
5. Be respectful of copyrights.
6. Be sure to use an appropriate signature line.
7. Be responsive to requests in a timely fashion.
8. Be cautious about when to click "reply to all."
9. Be thoughtful to not use all caps or all lower case.
10. Be respectful to not flame.
11. Be considerate to not multi-post, cross-post, off-topic post, or hijack a discussion thread.
12. Be careful to not forward inappropriate jokes, cartoons, photos, chain letters, spam, etc.

Other Rules

Have you had enough "Be-Attitudes" yet? No one likes to be Mirandized with all of these rules, but it couldn't be helped. I ran out of real content and I needed filler for this article.

Guess what? I'm almost done, but you're just beginning. This generic top 12 for academicians is a starter list. Your institution may have additional guidelines for Intranet and Internet communications. Further, if you teach or are a student in online courses, a separate set of rules and behaviors may be required for all virtual classroom communication (for example, see Chase, 2009; Smith, 2009). Teleseminars and Webinars also have specific guidelines for conduct (see Stein, n.d.). Check out these other rules. At least you have a Netiquette foundation on which to build, unless you skipped my "Be-Attitudes."

Final Thoughts

Please consider the importance of these "Be-Attitudes" and how they can affect *WHAT* you say online and, especially, *HOW* you say it. After you write anything, review it and be sensitive to the consequences of its reading before you hit "Send," "Post," or "Reply to all." Your professional reputation and credibility as well as career trajectory will depend on it. My final "Be-Attitude" is the unforgettable warning given every morning to the *Hill St. Blues* police officers by Sgt. Phil Esterhaus, waving his right index figure: "*Hey, let's BE CAREFUL OUT THERE!*"

References

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