



Third of Canadians admit sending e-mails they might rue

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More than one-third of Canadians (35 per cent) admit they've sent an e-mail on the company server that could come back to haunt them, even while the same number of people acknowledge that their employer probably checks their account. Three-quarters (74 per cent) say they're always careful about what they write, but others still don't know better. Fully 30 per cent know someone who has been disciplined for sending inappropriate e-mail at work, according to an e-mail etiquette poll released by Environics today.

"Every day you can read about and hear about yet another disastrous workplace e-mail gaffe where an executive was embarrassed or an employee was fired or a company was sued," says Nancy Flynn, executive director of the Ohio-based ePolicy Institute, which helps companies develop e-mail policies and counts several Canadian businesses among its clients. "In spite of all that, people continue to think, 'It's not going to happen to me.'"

But it does. A City of Toronto employee was disciplined for sending "inappropriate" pictures via a city computer last year; a British Columbia cabinet minister resigned after sending an expletive-filled e-mail to a constituent. Another B.C. politician stepped down after calling another a "potato-head" in a message sent to a group of recipients that included a local reporter. Only half of Canadians (52 per cent) think a company should have the right to sift through employees' electronic correspondence, the poll found, while virtually the same proportion (51 per cent) says their workplace has an e-mail policy spelled out. Just 43 per cent of those surveyed are aware that one of their electronic missives could be forwarded to others without their knowledge.

Canadian employees say they send an average of 2.6 personal e-mails a day from their work account, while seven per cent own up to sending 10 or more per day.

The poll, conducted June 11 to 16 by Environics on behalf of Yahoo! Canada, sampled 1,000 Canadian adults aged 18 and older and carries a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The stakes are higher in e-mail than in verbal communication because of the "digital shadow" left behind, says Alan Kearns, an Ottawa-based career coach and founder of CareerJoy.

"Twenty-four hours from now or even eight hours from now, when you look at that e-mail, are you going to be comfortable with what you said?" he says. "Because it's still going to be there."

Most employers realize that employees will send a few personal e-mails each day, Kearns says, just as it's acceptable to make a personal phone call or two while on the job. It only becomes a problem when an employee's productivity takes a dive or their electronic correspondence contains tactless information and reaches an inbox they didn't count on, he says. "In an organization, you could do a lot of good work but one bad e-mail could change your whole perception," he says.

Even Louise Fox, owner of Toronto-based Etiquette Ladies, admits she's sent some e-mails she wishes she hadn't. Her rule of thumb for circumventing e-mail regret is simple: assume there's no such thing as privacy. "If you wouldn't want to have it read by your mother, put on the fridge door in the staff room, published in your local newspaper or read by a nun, don't write it," she says.

If you prefer not to receive any further correspondence from Etiquette Ladies, you may choose to unsubscribe.