IMPROVING EMAIL PERFORMANCE

Keys to a successful corporate email initiative

by Roy Speed

creator of Email Excellence® and The Good Documents Series™

www.emailexcellence.com
You can raise email standards. Here’s how.

You recognize email’s drain on employee productivity; you’re ready to act. But you’ve never implemented a departmental email initiative, let alone one that’s company-wide. — Where do you start?

You start right here. In this paper you will find specific recommendations based on:

- a decade of research into employee email behaviors;
- hands-on experience with implementing corporate writing initiatives.

We know what it takes to:

- eliminate wasteful email behaviors;
- increase employee professionalism and impact with this medium.

About the author
Roy Speed is the president of Salient, Inc., a U.S. writing consultancy. For more than 20 years he has helped large companies implement writing standards to address a variety of business challenges. He is the author and narrator of Salient’s eLearning programs, which are now required training for more than 130,000 employees across North America.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND INSIDE:

- Understanding the email challenge: Two fundamental realities
- Lessons learned: Keys to a successful corporate initiative
- Finding the right solution: What to look for in an email training program
Two fundamental realities

Your efforts to reform email behavior will founder until you reckon with two facts:

- **Email is a “community” problem—and will yield only to “community” solutions.** The problem is that each employee’s productivity is hostage to that person’s Inbox—which may be flooded each day with a hundred or more lousy messages written by other people. Those messages are just as problematic as the ones each employee produces: when they’re poorly written or ill-conceived, they drain precious time and attention and squander company resources. Implications:

  - **You must target the Inbox.** Your aim is not just each employee’s outgoing emails, but the incoming ones as well.
  - **You must think big.** Your initiative must encompass entire email communities—groups of people who write to one another, like a department, a project team, or the entire company.

- **Improving email performance means changing habits.** Employees have now been writing and managing email for so long that many email behaviors and decisions have become automatic, unthinking (akin to driving a car while your mind is completely taken up with other matters). The problem here is twofold:

  - Good decisions with email often require a few seconds of real thought.
  - Deeply ingrained habits are not easily dislodged.
Keys to a successful corporate initiative

You can put an end to email insanity at your company, and we’ve learned a lot about what it takes for you to succeed.

1. Your training

Your initiative will succeed only if your email training tackles the following challenges:

- **Address current behavior.** You cannot simply slather email training on top of the hundreds of counterproductive behaviors that currently plague your company. Your training must first make employees aware of their current habits — and what those habits are costing the company.

- **Replace counterproductive habits with smart tools & practices.** When employees become aware of their unconscious behaviors, an opportunity appears: you can replace the old habit with a new routine. So for every counterproductive habit, your training must provide a new email standard or writing tool.

- **Focus on decision-making.** Traditional writing training will get you nowhere, because effective email is less about “wordsmithing” sentences than about making good decisions. Your training must emphasize clear thinking about a host of issues, like:
  - whether email is the right medium (a phone call instead?);
  - whom to cc: on any given message;
  - the kind of business record that’s needed;
  - appropriate length and level of detail.
2. Leadership

There are two things management must do:

- **Senior executives:** *Communicate conviction.*
  Your executive team must communicate that new email standards are coming and the problems the company is trying to solve. At bottom, what’s needed from your executives is real conviction. Without it, employees aren’t likely to buy into the initiative — and their belief in the new standards is indispensable.

- **Managers & supervisors:** *Coach employees on good decision-making.* Most managers know email dysfunction when they see it, and it’s likely that you already have managers and supervisors routinely coaching employees on email situations — like pointing out when email is the wrong medium (*Pick up the phone!*). Your new email standards will vastly enrich your managers’ arsenal for effective coaching, and the more reliant on email your company is, the more critical that coaching will be.

3. The roll-out

Successful roll-out depends on three things:

- **Speed.** Your implementation must be fast — the faster the better, a matter of weeks. Bear in mind two points:
  - To change employees’ habits, you need momentum, and you will achieve that momentum if you have lots of people having the same insights at the same time, trying out new things, and seeing immediate results.
  - When you implement new email standards across an entire division or your entire company, employees will see immediate results not just in their own writing, but in the beautifully clear, terse messages that start showing up in their Inboxes — which, for long-suffering victims of email insanity, is nothing less than thrilling.

- **No turning back.** All communications, all materials associated with your initiative must be uncompromising in their presentation of your new email standards: the new email practices must be positioned not as “best practices” or useful email “tips,” but as company policy, as performance standards.

- **Everyone on board.** The surest way to kill your momentum is for one of your VPs to consider him- or herself exempt from the new email standards. **Key principle:** No one is exempt — not even the CEO. In fact, the CEO must lead the charge.
4. Reinforcement

You must reinforce your training in all of the following ways:

- **Reference tools & job-aids.** Employees must have at their fingertips easy-to-use reference tools — reminders of the key email standards and writing tools.

- **Refresher training.** You’ll need periodic “refresher” training that reviews the key principles and extends them to changing business conditions.

- **Training for new hires.** You must integrate your program on email standards into your training for new hires.

- **Performance management.** Email performance must be completely integrated with your performance management system. Expectations for email performance must be clearly set out in job descriptions, and email must be addressed in annual performance reviews.
Email training tends to focus on personal organization — managing folders, keeping your Inbox lean and tidy, etc. — and that focus is useful; it just doesn’t go far enough. It doesn’t tackle one of the most important parts of the challenge: what’s showing up in the Inbox.

Your email initiative must target writing — and not just the writing of individuals, but of the entire business unit or even the entire company.

Here’s our checklist of things to look for in an email training program:

1. **What your program must do**

   To be effective, an email training program must —

   - **Build awareness.** Since email behavior is dominated by habit, your program must build awareness of 1) what employees are already doing that’s counterproductive, and 2) the costs of those behaviors.
   
   - **Set standards for the entire “community.”** Your program must set out clear, commonsense standards for the email issues that affect everyone — distribution (cc’ing), “Subject:” lines, email “signatures,” and so on.
   
   - **Provide writing tools.** Email writing needs to be simplified and streamlined through practical, easy-to-use writing tools.
   
   - **Teach good decision-making.** Your program must lay out the key decision points in email — and show employees how to think them through.
   
   - **Provide job-aids.** The program should include reference tools that enable employees to see at a glance the key email standards and writing tools.
2. Seminars vs. online training

We recommend “eLearning” and for several reasons:

For your employees —

- **Training anywhere.** Employees can do an eLearning program virtually anywhere, at any time: at their desks; at home; even at times that would otherwise be downtime — like while riding the train into work, or waiting at the gate for a delayed flight. A seminar, by contrast, requires scheduling dedicated time and possibly travel time and expenses.

- **Flexible pace.** Employees can tackle an entire eLearning course in one great chunk, if they like — but if they prefer, they can take it in bite-sized chunks of just 10 or 15 minutes at a time. Unlike a seminar, in other words, your employees can do eLearning at their own pace, whenever it’s convenient.

- **Continual access.** With eLearning, your employees can return to the training at any time and review any section — something you just can’t do with a workshop.

For your company —

- **Lower cost.** Seminar fees can run into hundreds of dollars per employee, to which you must add any travel expenses. For eLearning, by contrast, your per-head charge should work out to $100 or less.

- **Speed of deployment.** Booking seminars for the employees of an entire division — let alone the entire company — can be a logistical nightmare; the training itself can drag on for months. But with eLearning, you can get everyone on board in a matter of weeks.
3. What to look for in a partner

Choose a company you can count on working with for years to come.

Our recommendations:

- **Writing expertise.** Find a company with a long track record or tackling writing challenges in the business world. Avoid academic approaches.

- **Experience with corporate initiatives.** Thousands of practitioners have delivered writing classes; very few have implemented writing standards across entire companies.

- **Expertise with instructional design & eLearning.** Online training is notorious for low quality. You need a program your employees will find immediately useful and engaging.

- **Customization services.** You may need customized writing tools and standards. You may also want the training branded with your company’s logo, corporate colors, etc.