

Procedure 6.17 Guidance for usage of email and other communication tools					
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The Academy operates in a fast-paced environment and email, online technology are accepted as essential methods of communication to be used on a daily basis by all members of staff.

Considering the increasing reliance on the use of technology and online communication, all staff should be aware of the implications of this reliance and be mindful of the ways in which email functions and other communication tools such as Zoom, Teams and etc. are used effectively in an appropriate and professional manner. Staff working remotely across several devices such as desktops, laptops and smart phones are expected to ensure online communication tools are used appropriately, enhance working practices, relationships and improve the quality of operations.

The expectations set out in this policy form what is acceptable behaviour for the usage of both formal and less formal communication tools, such as emails and chats on online meeting platforms, while interacting with colleagues, students, suppliers, consultants, contractors and etc. This includes internal contacts such as colleagues, team members, students or volunteers, and those externals such as contractors or service providers. Expectations outlined in this guidance complement Procedure 1.6 Ethics Protocols which needs to be read and adopted by all members of staff.

1. Guidance principles

Any written form of communication (including emails and Teams / Zoom chat) is covered by a number of laws in the UK and can therefore be used for legal purposes. Individuals should also be mindful of the GDPR implications of how they share and store such communications.

Although email is often regarded as informal, and whilst the Teams or Zoom ‘chat’ functions may be used to communicate in a less formal way, written correspondence in the workplace is still considered Academy communication and, therefore, all staff are responsible for ensuring that these are professional and respectful at all times. Staff should also recognise that intensive or overuse of email can negatively impact recipients in several ways.

The excessive or inappropriate use of email, or emails containing unnecessary content, can result in information overload. Similarly, an over-reliance on, or inappropriate use of, Microsoft Teams, or a similar online communication tool, can be counterproductive. Examples include: excessive overuse of video conferencing resulting in increased screen time, calling individuals when they are already in a meeting or busy, expecting staff to reply to emails and/or Teams chats when they are on a call.

2. Fostering good working relationships

When sending emails or Zoom / Teams chats, senders should always be aware of their audience. In doing so it is important to keep any relevant dynamics in mind. Staff should ensure that care and attention is taken with email correspondence, just as it would be with a written letter, to reduce the chance of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

The 'bcc' (blind carbon copy) option should generally not be used in emails in the interest of disclosure and full transparency of communications to all parties, both the sender and recipient. It is however recommended for use when sending out marketing information to undisclosed recipients / groups.

When using video conferencing, individuals should aim to follow the usual office etiquette and not expect that somebody will always be 'at their desk', make sure that they are available to take a call and turn on video camera whenever possible.

Whilst immediate responses should not be expected, individuals should aim to respond to all messages within a reasonable timescale and, where a full response is not possible, ensure that a courtesy response is provided. What is considered 'reasonable' will vary depending on the nature and urgency of the original message, and individuals should exercise their professional judgment when prioritising replies.

3. Wellbeing and online communications

Lunch times and other appropriate breaks are key to ensuring that staff have reasonable time to recharge and revitalise during the working day, allowing them time away from screens and an opportunity to be more mobile. Lunchtimes and other breaks should be discussed and agreed locally; a break of 60 minutes for lunch is considered good practice, although this may vary depending on fluctuations in workload and length of work hours.

4. Out of hours communications

Considering the nature of some roles at the Academy, communications outside working hours will sometimes be both normal and necessary. For many other roles across the Academy, out of hours communications should be the exception rather than the rule.

Latest technologies allow access to emails and taking video calls via smart phones, tablets and laptops while on the move, which can mean that the boundary between professional and personal arenas can also become increasingly blurred.

While it is sender's choice to send an email that suits them, it is also the recipient's choice when to read it (i.e. normally within working hours), provided this is in line with the accepted levels of professional behaviour and aligned with the expectations of their role and responsibilities. There should be no general expectation that staff will read emails out of hours.

It is also important to note that some internal and external contacts of the Academy may have agreed reasonable response times to emails which have been communicated clearly to all affected and be respectfully accepted / adhered to.

5. Tackling problems

Where staff feel that colleagues are not making efforts to abide by the contents of this guidance it is reasonable to:

- ✓ Speak with the person reminding them about the procedure and encourage them to follow its advice. All staff should aim to support and remind each other of the importance of respecting boundaries and working in a professional and efficient manner.
- ✓ Speak to your line manager or HR in the first instance about an email/Video chat content for advice if necessary, if you feel it to be inappropriate.
- ✓ While feedback to the sender may still be necessary, it may help to empathise and consider if you could be reading too much into it especially if it happened only once.

6. Good practice for the use of email and online communication tools

- ✓ Consider which communication method is the most effective tool to use for the nature and urgency of the task.
 - Use email as a more formal means of communication such as relaying information, making a request for advice or a decision or provide a summary of a discussion or meeting.
 - Email may not be the most effective tool where an urgent response is needed. In such cases, alternatives should be considered such speaking in person or via phone / video calls. The chat functions on online communication tools can also be useful for asking quick, simple questions that are not urgent and can be responded to easily.
 - As well as facilitating meetings, video-conferencing calls are an effective way of having a discussion that might otherwise take place across the desk or by telephone.
- ✓ Always act respectfully and treat others with dignity at all times regardless of the form of communication chosen.
- ✓ Feel free to request training if you need on effective usage of online communication tools.
- ✓ Write all messages in a professional and courteous manner. The general content of a work communication expected to be consistent with other forms of written communication.
- ✓ Keep all messages and emails short and to the point as much as possible. This is particularly beneficial for recipients receiving large numbers of emails, and assist with recipients working remotely on tablets or mobiles if needed. Emails should include a salutation e.g. Dear..., Hi... and an email signature, except where the individuals involved are well-known to each other.
- ✓ Re-read messages and emails before sending from the perspective of the recipients to ensure your communication is clear and clearly highlight required actions.
- ✓ Do not leave the subject line blank in e-mails.
- ✓ Ensure appropriate use of cc. and whether all participants of an email need to continue to be cc'd or included in an email trail when the topic deviates to another issue.
- ✓ Be extremely cautious in the use of bcc. to meet integrity and transparency expectations.
- ✓ Try to minimise the use of graphics, different fonts, and formats stored within a document when sending it as an attachment to an email.
- ✓ Be extremely careful when sending any communications or emails containing personal or confidential information or attachments.
- ✓ Always check the recipient's name, especially if there is more than one person with the same name or where a person uses more than one email address.

- ✓ Consider talking confidentially in person or by phone regarding sensitive emails prior to sending it. If there is a possibility that the email will be misconstrued, misunderstood or intercepted, it is probably best avoided.
- ✓ Where the content of an extended email trail has changed direction or purpose be mindful of continuing to forward excessively long email trails to others or continuing to include others as either 'to' or 'cc' recipients unnecessarily.
- ✓ Avoid using uppercase text unless completely appropriate and necessary for particular emphasis (e.g. acronyms or initials of names), as this is often interpreted as electronic "shouting".
- ✓ Be careful when using humour, emojis and gifs within an email or Video chat to maintain professional and respectful communication to avoid misinterpretation.
- ✓ It is accepted that emails may be prepared and sent outside of normal working hours, however, replies should not be expected before the next working day commences, it can be reassuring to recipients to explicitly state this in the email signature or message to avoid ambiguity of expectations.
- ✓ Automated 'out of office' notifications can be used to manage expectations for both the recipient and sender of emails e.g. by explaining the time of return to work following a period of time off work, period of back-to-back meetings etc. It is helpful to ensure an appropriate signposted alternative is suggested.
- ✓ An informative email signature is an important part of using email well particularly if you are writing to someone for the first time. Your email signature should include your name, job title, department and your hours of work if you are working a non-standard pattern. Staff are also encouraged to include their preferred pronouns in their email signature, in support of a diverse and openly inclusive workplace.
- ✓ Once documents are finalised and unchanging such as committee papers, do not use multiple attachments where possible. Try to use a central folder that is accessible by all the recipients where possible rather than sending the documentation as an attachment.
- ✓ Use, and respect, the flagging system in Video calls (e.g. 'available', 'busy', 'be right back', 'appear away' and 'appear offline'). These can help to manage expectations and ensure that you are able to protect break times or concentrated work time. Meetings and calls will be automatically reflected, and the status will change to 'away' following a five-minute period of inactivity. Take care, however, to ensure that your status does not always suggest unavailability, particularly if you are a manager.
- ✓ Check an individual's status prior to calling them. If they are 'in a meeting', 'busy' or 'away', consider sending a message to agree a convenient time to make contact and to mutually agree a video call.
- ✓ The use of the 'quiet hours' functionality is useful to support wellbeing and protect work-home boundaries when using personal devices for work purposes. This can also help to protect time for uninterrupted, focused tasks.
- ✓ Turn the camera function on when interacting with colleagues on a video call or participating in meetings. This helps to promote positive social interactions and build/maintain working relationships. If you are unable to use the camera function, e.g. due to internet connection, explain this at the start of the meeting/call so that people are aware.
- ✓ The appropriateness of the background image selected in a video call should be considered according to circumstances, e.g. formal meetings, committees and external appointments may require a more formal background than team meetings or social events.
- ✓ Present yourself during a video-conferencing meeting as you would if you were attending a meeting in person.

- ✓ Use the 'mute' button in meetings when you are not speaking, particularly in larger meetings or if you have background noise. Using headsets can also be an effective means of ensuring a better sound quality by blocking out external noise for those in the meeting.
- ✓ The use of 'private chat' functionality is not encouraged during group meetings and you should be mindful that such discussions can be misconstrued or shared, inadvertently or intentionally, with others.
- ✓ Take care not to speak over people when in meetings. Use the 'Raise your Hand' function in meetings or include a message in the meeting chat to make it clear to the Chair that you wish to make a point.
- ✓ If you are chairing a new or irregular meeting, set out the required etiquette at the start so that everybody is aware of what is expected.
- ✓ Video-conferencing meetings increases the screen time for participants and, therefore, the following principles should be followed to manage this as far as possible:
 - As a good practice approach, ensure a break of at least five minutes at the end of all meetings. If this is not possible, consider having a five-minute break halfway through.
 - Do not hold meetings during lunchtimes unless prior agreement to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to take a lunch break and have a break from the screen.
 - Keep meetings focused and on track, sharing an agenda in advance where appropriate.
- ✓ Use relevant Video call functions to ensure that accessibility and inclusivity considerations are taken into account. Captioning functions and note-taking/recording functionality are available through Zoom / Teams. It is courteous to ensure all colleagues consent to being recorded in advance of commencing, or before continuing meetings. All participants in a recorded meeting will be able to access the recording for a limited period of time following the meeting.

7. Personal usage of email and other communication tools

These tools are provided to staff for work purposes, however, it is recognised that in a more flexible work-life environment, limited usage of work email for personal usage is unlikely to cause a significant adverse impact on work productivity. Nonetheless, staff should ensure that personal use of email and video call functions do not negatively affect work performance and do not take precedence over work that requires urgent attention. Personal use should be limited to lunch breaks and other non-work times.

Staff should also be aware that any material containing inappropriate content is not acceptable at any time. Staff should also be made aware that, 'deleting or 'permanently deleting' emails does not mean they are unrecoverable at a later date.