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Insults in your inbox

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XTRA OFFICE COMMUNICATIONS

INSULTS IN YOUR INBOX

Email is a boon at work, but aggressive staff may use it to inflict humiliation

DR MANOJ THULASIDAS

EMAIL has revolutionised corporate communication in the last decade. Most of its impact has been positive. An email from the big boss to *all@yourcompany*, for instance, is a fair substitute for a general communication meeting. In smaller teams, email often saves meetings and increases productivity.

When compared to other modes of communication (telephone, voice mail, *et cetera*), email has a number of characteristics that make it particularly suited for corporate communication.

It gives the sender the right amount of distance from the recipient to feel safe behind the keyboard. The sender gets enough time to polish the language and presentation. The sender has the option of sending the email to multiple recipients at once.

The net effect of these characteristics is that a normally

timid soul may become a formidable email persona.

A normally aggressive soul, on the other hand, may become an obnoxious sender of what are known as stinkers. Stinkers are emails that are meant to inflict humiliation.

Given the importance of email communication these days, you may find yourself seduced by the dark allure of stinkers. If you do, here are the first steps in mastering the art of crafting a stinker. The trick is to develop a holier-than-thou attitude and assume a moral high ground.

For instance, suppose you are upset with a team for their shoddy work, and want to highlight the fact to them (and to a few key persons in the organisation, of course). A novice may be tempted to write something like: "You and your team don't know squat."

Far more satisfying is to compose it as: "I will be happy

to sit down with you and your team and share our expertise." This craftier composition also subtly shows off your superior knowledge.

Emails can be even more subtle. For instance, you can sweetly counsel your boss re-

garding some issue as: "No point in rushing in where angels fear to tread," and have the secret pleasure that you managed to call him a fool to his face!

Counter-stinkers are doubly sweet. While engaging in an email duel, your best hope is to discover a factual inaccuracy in the stinker. Although you are honour-bound to respond to a stinker, silence also can be an effective response.

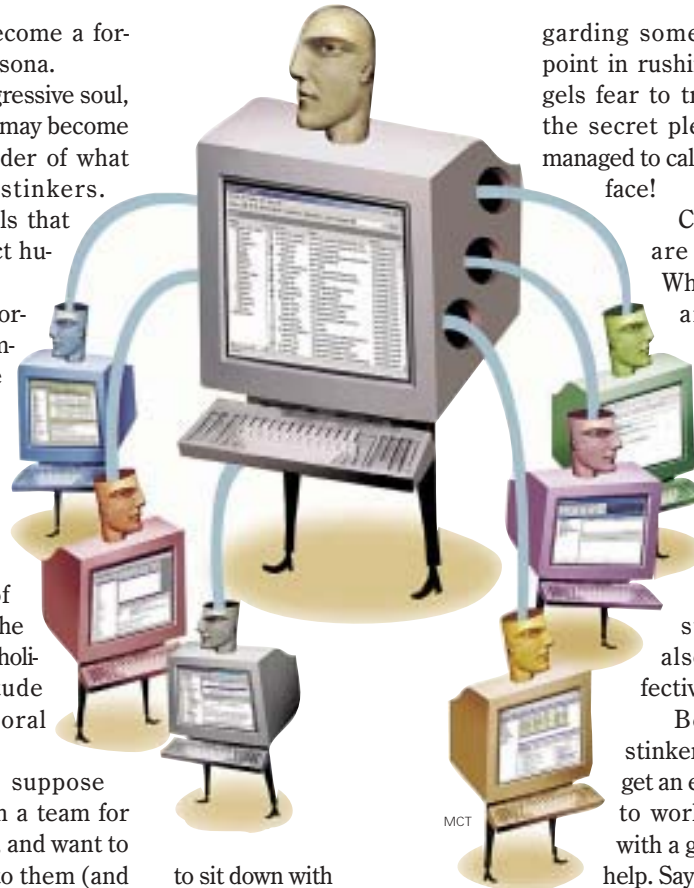
Beware of the stinker traps. You may get an email inviting you to work on a problem with a generous offer to help. Say you take the bait and request help. The next email (copied to practically everybody on earth) may read something like: "If you had bothered to read the previous message," (referring to an email sent 10 days ago to 17 others

and two email groups) "you would know that ..." Note how easy it is to imply that you don't know what you are supposed to, and that you are in the habit of ignoring important messages.

We have no sure defence against stinker traps other than knowing the sender. If a sender is known for his stinker-happy disposition, treat all his sweet overtures with suspicion. It is unlikely that he has had a change of heart and decided to treat you civilly. Much more likely is that he is setting you up for something that he will enjoy rather more than you!

At the end of the day, don't worry too much about stinkers if you do find yourself at the receiving end. Keep a smile on your face and recognise the stinkers for what they are — ego trips.

*The writer is a scientist from the European Organization for Nuclear Research, who currently heads OCBC's Quantitative Analytics team. His internationally-acclaimed book, *The Unreal Universe*, is available in local bookstores and at www.TheUnrealUniverse.com.*



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