

## Tip sheet

# Hostile emails in the workplace

Hostile emails are becoming more common in workplaces, causing stress for both employees and employers. These kinds of emails aren't just about the words we choose – they often include formatting designed to emphasise anger. Bolding, underlining, italics, all-caps and even colour change and emojis can add visual weight to the frustration.



Most of us have likely sent an angry email when we're frustrated. The problem with email is that it's almost as quick as our temper but sticks around much longer. Many people end up with 'email regret' after calming down, often leading to an apology or acknowledging that the tone was off.

In more extreme cases, someone might be so emotionally charged that they don't recognise how inappropriate or excessive their email was. This is often seen in deteriorating personal or professional relationships, or during formal disputes like workplace grievances or business conflicts. And once something is in writing, it has the potential to resurface when you least expect it.

Typically, hostile emails are just emotional outbursts without much deeper significance, but how you handle a hostile email can significantly affect whether or not the conflict escalates. Even reasonable people can become unreasonable under pressure, and others, who thrive on conflict, will keep fighting regardless of the

situation. No matter who you're dealing with, here are some tips to avoid adding fuel to the fire. At times, emails sent in hurry can appear to be curt or hostile leaving the receiver questioning the motive or interaction.

## Healthy responses to a hostile email

### Decide if it even needs a response

Not all hostile emails require a reply. A polite acknowledgment may be enough. That said, if the email contains inaccurate information, it may be important to correct the facts, sticking to the facts – leave emotions and opinions out of it.

### Stay calm and focus on the issue

When we're upset, our ability to think clearly gets compromised. Reading a hostile email can trigger emotional responses, and the temptation to fire off a quick reply is strong. However, it's crucial to step back, calm down and give yourself some time before responding.

Writing a draft response can be cathartic, but sending it right away might not be the best idea. Instead, save it, sleep on it and review it later with a clear head. You'll likely realise it's better not to send it at all and you may have misunderstood the intent.

### Pick your battles

Not every hostile email is worth your energy (or even thinking about). Before you hit send on a reply, even on a perfectly professional response, ask yourself, 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how important is this email in the grand scheme of things?' Often, you'll find it's not worth the stress or time or perhaps you need more information to get a better picture.

### Be clear about your goals

When writing a response, focus on what you want to achieve rather than what the other person did wrong.

Avoid personal attacks, sarcastic comments or cynical digs. Criticising someone only makes things worse, especially with people who are already prone to conflict. The goal should be to de-escalate. Usually, a conversation can be managed more effectively.

### Respond using the BIFF model

One helpful technique for responding to hostile emails is the BIFF model—Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm. This method was created by Bill Eddy, a family law practitioner and mediator, to help manage high-conflict situations.

- **Brief:** Keep your reply short. The more you write, the more the other person may pick apart and respond to.
- **Informative:** Correct any inaccurate statements with just the facts. Focus on what's important, not on what the other person got wrong.
- **Friendly:** A friendly tone can go a long way in de-escalating a situation. Keep your response relaxed and avoid letting your anger show.
- **Firm:** Be clear and confident without being aggressive. Don't invite more discussion unless you're open to continuing the dialogue. If further hostile emails come in, you can ignore them if you've already addressed the main points.

Sometimes, the best response is a simple acknowledgment, and sometimes it's no response at all or follow up with a conversation to ensure there are no misunderstandings. Keep perspective and save your energy for what truly matters.

### Escalate to a third party – only if absolutely necessary

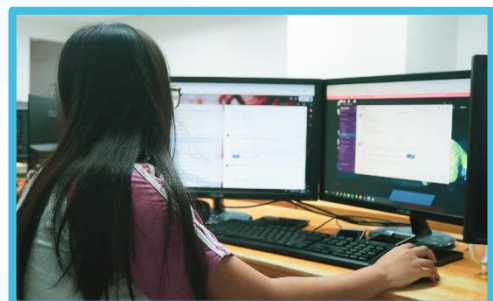
While the main thing when responding to a hostile email is to keep the situation from escalating, there are rare occasions where the problem cannot be resolved peacefully between yourself and the sender despite your best efforts to disengage, deescalate and move forward.

If hostile emails continue or cross into abusive territory, it may be appropriate to approach a manager and ask for some support.

The goal is not to get the hostile sender's back up, although this may be unavoidable, but instead to try another approach to building understanding and settling the conflict.

This may include engagement through a neutral party such as a dispute resolution specialist.

If you need support, contact our team any time at 0508 664 981, email [assistance@vitae.co.nz](mailto:assistance@vitae.co.nz) or visit our website at [www.vitae.co.nz](http://www.vitae.co.nz) to make a booking.



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