Writing effective memos and emails

- **Do you write memos or emails at work?**
- **Memos and emails are a simple way of communicating in writing with other people.**
- **Do you have to give messages to people in your organisation and in other organisations?**

There are many ways of communicating in writing. We can write letters or reports. A record of formal meetings is called the minutes of the meeting. But the simplest way of communicating in writing is to send a memo or, now that many people use computers at their desks, emails.

Writing memos and emails isn't difficult. If you keep to some simple rules you will ensure that your communications are clear and easily understood. Good communication means that the people you are communicating with receive your communication, read what you have written, understand what you want to say and do whatever you wanted them to do. In this session you will find out how to do that so that you write effective memos and emails.

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Writing Memos

Memo is short for *memorandum*, a Latin word meaning 'something to bring to mind'. In other words, it is a reminder or note for future reference. That means it doesn't have to be too formal, but it should be to the point. That way, the people who receive a memo only have to read what is important.

Memos are a form of internal communication. An internal communication is a way of sharing information inside an organisation. For example, a team leader may send team members a memo about a forthcoming meeting. Managers may send memos to their staff to announce organisation news.

A memo is generally used to share brief information. It might give team members new instructions or directions. A human resources department might send a memo about a new organisation policy or procedure. Employees use memos to provide short reports about projects and to update information.

If there is a lot of information to give to people, this may be written as a report or set of guidelines which is then circulated to staff with a **covering memo**. A covering memo will explain what the longer document is about, who should read it or where it should be kept.

Memos are useful because they provide written records of conversations, meetings, or decisions. If a report or minutes of a meeting would be too formal to use, a memo can be used in their place.

A memo puts information into an easy-to-read format. The format uses four short headings at the top of the first page.

TO:	(The person who is to receive the memo)
FROM:	(The person who is sending the memo)
DATE:	(The day on which the memo is sent)
SUBJECT:	(What the memo is about)

The body of a memo can include the following:

- A summary of the information
- Details about the information
- A request for some kind of action

An Example Memo

The memo below is from Abby Sinclair, who works in the human resources department. She is writing to Jane Hahn, who is heading the committee for the Christmas party.

Memo

Receiver	TO: Jane Hahn, Christmas Party Committee
Sender	FROM: Abby Sinclair, Human Resources Dept.
Today's date	DATE: 9/10/06
Subject	SUBJECT: Office Christmas Party

Summary

I have a few suggestions for planning the Christmas party this year.

I suggest that you organise the party for a Friday evening. That way people can stay late. They won't have to worry about work the next day.

Details

- It might be a good idea to hold the party at a restaurant instead of at the office. Try to choose a place that will appeal to most people.
- The human resources manager has said that the organisation is willing to pay up to £20 per person for food and drink.

Request for action

The proposal for the party needs to get to me in the HR Department by the 1st November. Please check with at least three restaurants. That way we can get the best deal possible. Feel free to contact me with questions or problems.

Notice how much information Abby put in this short memo. She could have met Jane and talked things over with her. However, the memo saved her time. It also gives Jane a written record of Abby's suggestions and requests.

Don't be too concerned about the layout of the memo (the position of the various titles on the page). Some organisations will have a specific layout for memos which you must use, but the titles shown here will still be present. You should also notice that, unlike a letter, the memo is not signed. This is usual, although sometimes senders initial memos at the bottom.

Memos are often sent out as email attachments these days, rather than circulated on paper. This is because the senders want the extra formality of a memo. Some people think that, to emphasise the formability, they should write memos in the third person. That means, they don't say 'I' or 'me' (the first person) or 'you ' (the second person) but talk about 'the writer' and the 'recipients of the memo'. This style of writing is generally thought of as old-fashioned but, if people in your organisation normally write memos like this, you should attempt to use it.

Always remember that a memo is a form of communication that can save everyone time. Knowing how to write a memo will help you perform your job better.

Exercise

Compose a memo to your team members to remind them about the need to record telephone messages carefully. Use the style which your organisation encourages.

TO: _____

FROM: _____

SUBJECT: _____

DATE: _____

Writing emails

An email is a message sent from one computer to another. This can be in the same organisation or to someone working on the other side of the world. Email is formatted, or laid out, to look a lot like a memo. It has the same headings: **To:**, **From:**, and **Subject:** It also has the extra heading, **Cc:** This is an abbreviation of **carbon copy**. This means that a copy of a memo, letter or email is also sent to someone else, for their information. You can also send a **blind carbon copy**. This means that other recipients don't know that this person is getting a copy.

To begin writing an email you must open your email programme and fill in the header (the details at the top of the email) for your message. If you are replying to an email sent to you, this is done quite easily by clicking on the **Reply** button. The header will be created for you. Otherwise, you will fill in the header as follows:

- The **To:** line for the email name and address where the message is to be sent
- The **Cc:** line for any other email names and addresses where you want your message sent (if there are any). It is easy to send emails to large numbers of people at the click of a button. That doesn't mean you should. Don't waste people's time sending them email 'just in case' they need to know.
- The **Subject:** line. This should be short and indicate what the email is about.
- You shouldn't need to fill in the **From:** line as this should automatically show the email address of whoever it is that the programme is set up for on that computer.

The address the email is being sent to, or the people who will get copies (Cc) of the email, may be in an electronic **address book** on your computer. If not, you will have to enter the addresses using your keyboard. You may also decide to put an address in your address book for the future.

Most (but not all) email addresses are written in lower case (that is, they don't use any capital letters). The first part of the address is the name of person you are writing to. John Smith might be 'johns' or 'jsmith'. Or it could be a name like 'info' or 'enquiries' rather than a person. This first part is followed by the sign @ (pronounced 'at') and the **domain name**.

The domain name is the registered Internet name of the organisation where John Smith works or the name of an organisation supplying the Internet service to John Smith. If John Smith worked on producing **Building Success** his email address would be 'jsmith@teamsthatwork.co.uk'. The different endings (called **extensions**) are explained in the box below.

The critical thing is to get the name exactly right. Computers aren't clever, they can't cope with even the smallest mistake!

Example

American registered domains don't have a country in the extension. However, you don't have to be US-based to register an American domain; many organisations from around the world have registered with the extension **.com**.

The most common UK extensions are:

.co.uk (a UK business; also possible are **ltd.uk** and **plc.uk**)

.gov.uk (a UK central or local government organisation)

.ac.uk (a UK university, college or school)

.org.uk (a UK association or society)

There can be lots of people with the same domain name in their address but there is only one 'jsmith@teamsthatwork.co.uk' in the world – that way email will only end up in the right computer 'post box'. If there are a lot of 'John Smiths' at the same domain, they may have to use their middle initials (jmsmith) or a number after their name (jsmith3) to distinguish between them.

If you are telling someone an email address you should read it out like this: "jsmith at teamsthatwork dot co dot uk". Use the word *dot* rather than say *full stop*. If you are writing your email address in a letter and it comes at the end of the sentence, do not use a full stop to end the sentence as this may confuse someone because an email address *never* ends with a full stop. If there are any errors in an email address it will be **bounced**, or returned undelivered.

Writing email

Should emails be written like letters or like memos? Should they be formal or informal? Does spelling and punctuation matter? Email is often written less formally than letters or memos. However, if you are sending an email to someone outside the organisation, you should always remember that you are responsible for the image of the organisation.

You don't need to write 'Dear ….' but you can start with just the recipient's name. Emails can be brief, and are useful for sending very short notes – just one line if you want.

Check your spelling and punctuation to ensure that the message is clear - most email programmes have a spell-check. People do accept mistakes in emails because they are seen as a fast way of communicating. Speed may sometimes be more important than absolute accuracy, but that's no excuse for sloppiness. Judge the **importance** of the message, as well as the **urgency**.

Never use email at work for frivolous reasons, no matter who you are sending it to. Don't send jokes, make personal comments or arrange non-work activity. Don't make references of a sexual or derogatory manner. Remember that one person's humour can be insulting to another person. Jokey comments can be interpreted as sexual or racial harassment. The law is quite clear – it is the *effect* your comments have which matters, not the *intention* behind them.

That also means you should stop team members from abusing email, and the Internet for that matter. It wastes time, uses up the system's capacity and your employer could be held liable if another employee complained to an Employment Tribunal. As the team leader, you are responsible for discouraging improper behaviour. If you see it happening you should tell people to stop it. If they continue, or if it's serious abuse, you should report it to your manager

Look at the example email on the next page and then have a go at the exercise and write your own. Using email well helps you to be more effective as a team leader.

An Example Email

From: sales@teamsthatwork.co.uk

To: danielle@trainteam.co.uk

Cc:

Subject: Your enquiry

Building Success 2 is available on CD. Each CD contains around 120 sessions. Each session is about 30 minutes learning. We have BS2 in stock and can deliver within 24 hours. A sample session is available on our website at www.teamsthatwork.co.uk

Thanks for your enquiry.

David

The email contains an Internet address www.teamsthatwork.co.uk as a hyperlink. The recipient can click on the hyperlink and bring the website up on screen .

Exercise

Send an email to John Smith to tell him that the goods he ordered are now in stock and ready for him to collect.

From:

To:

Cc:

Subject:

Comprehension Check

Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A Write the word or term that best completes each sentence. Choose from the list.

announcements	internal	summary
details	policy	update
instructions	request for action	procedure
email	formatted	header
reply	externally	

A memo is an _____ communication. It is used to make _____ or give _____. Sometimes a memo tells about a new _____ or _____. It might provide an _____ on existing information. At the end of the memo, there is often a _____ __ _____.

Sending messages internally or _____ also can be done through your computer using _____. This type of message is like a memo. It is a simple process to send email. At the top of your email message is the _____. If you want send a reply to an email you have received, you can click the _____ button and your header will be created for you.

B Mark the following statements T (True) or F (False).

___ 1. Memos are more formal than business letters.
___ 2. Internal communication takes place inside an organisation.
___ 3. A policy is a request for action.
___ 4. Memos are usually two or three pages long.
___ 5. A memo can't be used to make a record of a meeting.
___ 6. Emails are a quick form of communication.
___ 7. Email addresses should always be written in upper case.

Making Connections

This is a briefing from your line manager about a project. Answer the questions following the briefing.

"The Chief Executive has asked me to set up a community links project, to help raise our profile locally. The idea is that the employees choose a local community project or charity which the organisation will support for a year, by fund-raising and by giving people short secondments to help.

I've got to get a steering group together to run the project which has representatives from across the organisation. Are there any people in your team who you think might be any good? It needs someone with common sense, who lives locally, and who would be interested in playing a part in the project.

It will be run in work time, as far as possible, and only involves the odd hour or so once or twice a month. Any ideas?"

1 Write a memo addressed to one of your team members to ask the team member if he/she would be willing to be nominated to be on the steering group of the project. You must decide which information from the briefing needs to be included. The purpose of the memo is to let the chosen team member know about the new project.

2 Write an email to your line manager, saying who you are suggesting and why you think that team member should be on the steering group. (Assume the person has agreed to be nominated.)

Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about how often you use memos and emails.

- Do you use the most appropriate form of communication, in the right way? If you don't use them, do you think you are now able to use them effectively, if the need arises?
- Do other people in your team and your organisation use memos and emails effectively? What examples have you seen of good and bad practice?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

Skills	*strengths <- - - -> weaknesses*			
	I'm good at this	I'm quite good at this	I'm not so good at this	I'm quite poor at this
■ choosing the right format for writing	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ writing memos	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ writing emails	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ advising team members on their use of memos and emails	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)