

# Electronic Mail and Professionalism: Perceptions & Practices

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## Background

- Electronic mail, or e-mail, is an essential method of communication within medical education settings.
- Professionalism is a standard component of undergraduate and graduate medical education curricula. While there is a growing body of literature focused on provider to patient communication and studies involving social media, relatively little research exists on e-mail practices and professional behaviors.
- The purpose of this study was to identify and examine habits, perceptions, and expectations related to e-mail and professionalism in order to inform recommendations in an interdisciplinary academic medical setting.

## Methods

- A 36 item survey was created. The anonymous survey tool contained demographic questions as well as items designed to evaluate perceptions and personal practices related to e-mail use in professional settings.
- The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board and distributed via e-mail to faculty, trainees, and students within the School of Medicine and School of Nursing.
- All differences between groups were analyzed using chi square analysis.

## Results

- 360 surveys were analyzed with 66% of respondents reporting that e-mail practices “somewhat” or “very much” affected professional reputation.
- There were no statistically significant differences regarding perceptions around response times or e-mail practices affecting professional reputation for age, gender, and ethnicity.
- 73% of respondents perceived that their level of professionalism was in line with peers.
- Most individuals were not aware of any institutional guidelines.
- The most unprofessional e-mail habits reported were: no/slow responses, grammar/spelling issues, and the use of emoticons.
- Students and faculty reported similar behaviors regarding how many e-mail messages are ignored.

	No.* (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	221 (63)
Male	131 (37)
<b>Age (years)</b>	
Less than 25	51 (14)
25-34	121 (34)
35-44	76 (21)
45-54	53 (15)
55 or older	59 (16)
<b>Ethnicity/Race</b>	
White	242 (72)
Asian	31 (9)
Black	25 (7)
Hispanic/Latino	16 (5)
Multi-racial	13 (4)
Indian	5 (1)
Other	4 (1)
Pacific Islander	2 (1)
<b>Current training or professional level</b>	
Graduate student (not MD or MD/PhD)	12 (3)
Medical student	71 (20)
Nursing student	1 (0.3)
PA student	48 (14)
PA resident	2 (1)
Faculty	181 (51)
Staff	17 (5)
Other**	21 (6)
<b>Primary professional affiliation (for Faculty/Staff)</b>	
MD	128 (64)
PhD	24 (12)
MD/PhD	12 (6)
PA	10 (5)
DNP	3 (2)
NP	2 (1)
Other	20 (10)

Survey Item	No. (%)		p-value
	STUDENTS	FACULTY	
<b>On a typical business day, about how many messages do you receive at this email account?</b>			<0.0001
0-10	63 (45)	9 (5)	
11-20	62 (44)	26 (15)	
21-30	8 (17)	39 (22)	
31-40	5 (4)	23 (13)	
More than 40	2 (1)	78 (45)	
<b>Overall would you say you receive too many work-related emails?</b>			<0.0001
Yes	32 (23)	103 (59)	
No	108 (77)	72 (41)	
<b>Some people read all of their work e-mail messages and other people completely ignore certain work e-mail messages. About how many of your e-mail messages do you ignore?</b>			0.06
Less than 10%	39 (29)	62 (36)	
10-25%	25 (18)	33 (19)	
26-50%	19 (14)	17 (10)	
51-75%	6 (4)	1 (1)	
More than 75%	6 (4)	2 (1)	
None, I try to read every email	41 (30)	59 (34)	
<b>Please estimate how often you open and read an e-mail where a response is expected and you do not respond?</b>			0.02
Never	69 (51)	62 (36)	
Sometimes	63 (46)	110 (63)	
Most of the time	3 (2)	2 (1)	
All of the time	1 (1)	0 (0)	
<b>When you email a colleague and a response is required, how soon do you expect them to respond?</b>			0.28
Within a few hours	23 (17)	21 (12)	
In the next day or two	104 (77)	135 (78)	
Within a week	8 (6)	17 (10)	
Within two weeks	0 (0)	0 (0)	
<b>To what extent do email practices affect professional reputation?</b>			0.53
Not at all	3 (2)	3 (2)	
Not too much	47 (35)	48 (28)	
Somewhat	66 (49)	98 (57)	
Very much	19 (14)	23 (14)	

Comparison of responses between students (N = 144) and faculty (N = 144). Note, those identifying themselves as being in a “staff” or other role (i.e. not student, not faculty) (N = 35) were excluded from this analysis.

## Discussion

While professionalism is emphasized throughout medical education, very little training occurs specific to e-mail communication. There is a paucity of research on e-mail communication among medical professionals. This is one of the first studies to directly assess the e-mail habits of an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty. Our study reveals a perceived connection between professionalism and e-mail, while simultaneously suggesting certain unprofessional habits exist without institutional guidance. Further research is needed with the goal to standardize recommendations for e-mail communication strategies.

## References

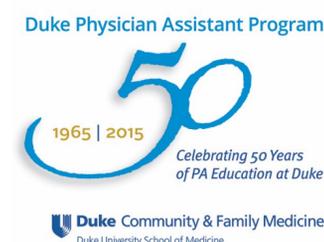
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\*Numbers may not add to 100 due to missing responses or survey skip patterns for some items.  
 \*\*Includes administrative manager (1), physical therapists (3), physical therapy students (8), physician assistant (1), MD/PhD candidate (1), MD (1), MD/MBA student (1), PhD RN Post doc fellow (1), no response (3).