

E-Mail Etiquette

This scenario was adapted from the
New York Times, 8 Dec. 1991.

Position One: Respect the Privacy of Communication

When Alana Shoars arrived for work at Epson America, Inc., one morning in January 1990, she discovered her supervisor reading and printing out electronic mail messages between other employees. As electronic mail administrator, Ms. Shoars was appalled. When she had trained employees to use the computerized system, Ms. Shoars told them their mail was private. Now a company manager was violating that trust. You don't read other people's mail, Ms. Shoars believes, just as you don't listen to their phone conversations. Right is right, and wrong is wrong.

Michael Simmons, chief information officer at the Bank of Boston, disagrees completely. If the corporation owns the equipment and pays for the network, that asset belongs to the company, and the company has a right to look and see if people are using it for purposes other than running the business. Mr. Simmons says that at a previous job, he discovered an employee using the computer system to handicap horses, and another running an Amway business on company time.

You believe that electronic mail has the same status as paper mail and that reading it is a violation of the employee's privacy. Employers don't go through employee desks looking for information and they shouldn't look through their electronic mail.

Defend your position.

Position Two: E-Mail Is Public Communication

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As the internal computer consultant for your corporation, you agree with Mr. Simmons. Computer networks are designed for business use. Monitoring the network is not unusual supervision practice and is ethical.

Defend your position.