

# What's Deadlier Than An E-mail Virus?

By Diana Ratliff

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The perpetrators of e-mail viruses have caused untold anguish to people all around the world. They've cost ethical computer users billions of dollars and countless man-hours. The very mention of a new e-mail virus makes front-page newspaper headlines.

So what could be worse?

Don't get me wrong. I think the people who create viruses ought to be folded, spindled, and mutilated. But at least there's some consolation in the fact that you're one of many anonymous victims. In my opinion, it's much worse when you cause that kind of damage to yourself.

How?

By accident, of course, and the chief cause is taking your e-mail for granted.

We rely on e-mail, and now send more e-mail messages than traditional "snail mail" letters. People will even e-mail the person in the next room rather than walk ten steps.

That familiarity and convenience sometimes fosters sloppy, dangerous habits that can ruin your business and your reputation just as surely as any email virus.

There are personal, professional, and legal pitfalls associated with careless e-mail usage. And a lot of the problem starts when people forget that e-mail is never completely private. E-mail is stored on another computer en route to you. E-mail can be forwarded to thousands of other users. E-mail can be printed out and posted on your company bulletin board or mailed to your competitor. And e-mail passwords can be stolen.

Legally, you can get into trouble when you slander someone in an e-mail, when you forward copyrighted material as your own, when you make changes to someone else's e-mail, or when you violate other laws. E-mail messages can be used in legal investigations or as evidence in lawsuits.

Professionally, remember that many companies monitor employee e-mail and Internet usage. Violating company policies (say, sending pornographic material) can cost you your job. But more common are the slip-ups caused by forwarding e-mail without the other person's permission, or by ignoring the company chain of command to contact higher management directly.

Personally, if your e-mail usage creates an impression that you're rude, unethical, or that you waste

other people's time, you might as well stop paying for Internet service, because no one's going to send you mail any way. (Well, there's always those spammers and e-mail perpetrators.)

So before you hit "Send" on that next e-mail message, ask yourself the following questions:

- \* Could I say this to the person's face?
- \* Could I say this in front of Mom?
- \* Would I want this posted on a bulletin board, or forwarded to someone else?
- \* Do I have permission to send this?
- \* Does the recipient need to know this information?
- \* Am I violating any policies or laws?
- \* Have I given credit when necessary, indicated references, and labeled my opinion as such?
- \* Am I writing this while I'm angry or upset?
- \* Is e-mail the best way to deliver this information? (Some messages have greater impact when delivered in person, or by an actual honest-to-goodness, hold-in-your-hands letter.)

Don't let your e-mail turn into an e-NAIL in your business coffin.

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