Communication: an important way to successful collaboration

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Written, faxed, telephone and electronic correspondence are all a means of carrying out professional tasks and must be governed by set rules. It must be established what a head of a department has to arrange or sign and what falls under the competence of heads of laboratories or research teams. Letters sent by post should use a uniform letter-paper with information about the name of the workplace, which may be supplemented below the heading or next to the signature by the name of the department, reference laboratory, the name of the project etc. Letter-paper gives the telephone and fax numbers, the e-mail address and web-page of the workplace. They should have the logo of the workplace and a striking design so that, in cases where contact is frequent, the sender may be instantly identified by merely fleeting glance at the heading. For correspondence with foreign partners, it is appropriate to use English or multi-lingual letter-paper. Each letter must indicate the date and reference number, under which the matter is being dealt. A record of correspondence sent and received may be kept at the directorate and at individual departments independently; it must, however, be expressed in the reference number. The record must provide essential information about the time of receipt or dispatch, about the transfer of matters for attention (to whom and when) and about the storage of a document or its copy. The reference number for sent correspondence is also on the envelope. The system of records and storage of received and sent correspondence must meet the requirements for the period of enshrinement of documents and permit searching and access to all documents even in the absence of the employees who dealt with them.

Each letter must, in addition, contain the full address to which it is being sent (identical to the address on the envelope). Professional correspondence should be sent to the address of the institution, not to the name of its employee. However, if the name of the person who is dealing with the matter is known, his name may be included under the name of the institution (F.A.O. ….., Attn: …..).

In official contact, colleagues should not address each other familiarly, even if the sender and recipient know each other well. Often a letter may become part of documentation or is forwarded for an expert opinion or attention of the recipient's superiors and its familiar form may not be appropriate. It is, however, possible to attach a separate piece of paper with a personal message.

If an item of correspondence is following up previous negotiations or responds to a letter received, a suitable reference should be included to enable the recipient to pass it onto the relevant employee or to ease its resolution. Often a sender incorrectly "kindly asks for" instead of "asks if (the recipient) would be so kind as to assess". Thanking in advance for the fulfilment of a request will do no harm, thanking for a service rendered (not for an authority fulfilling its obligations) should, however, go without saying.

Correspondence sent by post should be signed by the signatory in his or her own hand above their name printed in full with title and function (e.g. institute director, departmental manager, reference laboratory manager, researcher in charge of project etc.). In recent years, the use of academic titles has come to be considered a sign of a lack of modesty, according to trends in the countries of Western Europe and the USA. There it really is impossible to encounter the titles of Doctor or Engineer before a name, because the level of university education attained is expressed by the titles M.D., M.V.D. , BSc., M.S., Ph.D., which follow the name. However, before the name or for address in a letter or in personal contact, Dr (for holders of Ph.D.) or Professor is normally used. Titles are not used in private but in official correspondence, on business cards, and in signatures of peer reviews, proposals and requests are often used along with the name of the university from which they

originated and with information about honours awarded and memberships of important and prestigious academic societies. Therefore beware when a well-known profesor during personal discussions says "call me George". This is an honour which, however, does not mean that it is appropriate in the letter to begin "Hi, George" and end "Bye, Pepa".

Paragraphs should begin without indentation and should be separated by missing a line. Tables should be ordered, and text should be centred or aligned to the right using the appropriate text editor commands, not by repeatedly pressing the space bar or tab key. Common errors include two spaces between words, a space missing after a comma, colon or a full stop. Texts should be checked using a programme for spelling and grammatical errors. Before printing, the carefully checked text will be aligned using the justify command. It is therefore necessary to choose the correct margins for the page. Big spaces between words caused by a long word at the beginning of the next line may be removed by dividing the word. It is, however, appropriate to save the text before dividing words, because during later formatting of the text the divided words may easily be moved to places in the middle of a line and have to be removed. Hyphens may be found and erased using the appropriate functions of the text editor. A gradual search and check of replacement is, however, recommended because replacing all hyphens at once may result in the disappearance of minus signs, hyphens in words and hyphens at the end of a line.

Fax messages should, apart from the above requisites of a letter, also have a special heading indicating clearly the details of the recipient for whom the fax is intended and to which number it is being sent), the sender (who is sending the fax and from which number) and how many pages are being sent. Such a heading facilitates delivery without detailed reading of the text and above all facilitates return information in cases of illegibility or non-receipt of all pages sent.

Electronic mail (e-mail) enables the very fast and cheap exchange of information and documents. It may be sent at the same time to several addresses (e-mail addresses are separated with commas without spaces) or to a group of addresses. A copy may also be sent to other e-mail addresses. This is appropriate, for example, for informing co-workers or a management team of correspondence in progress. A copy of the reply received should also be sent to all who are working on the problem. It is easy to find out from the heading of each e-mail whether the sender has already sent a copy to other colleagues.

Mail programmes permit the automatic attachment of a signature and this option should be used. The signature should give the name and function of the sender, the address of his workplace, the phone and fax numbers. For correspondence with foreign partners, this should be in English, as should various automatic responses or e-mail confirmations of receipt. Several signatures may be prepared; their selection is very simple.

Every e-mail should include a subject, by which the recipient may recognise its content and assess its urgency. Electronic letters may be stored after reading in various e-mail boxes by subject or sender. It is appropriate to use the option of asking for confirmation of delivery and that the letter has been read (displayed). The dispatch of information indicating receipt of e-mails to your address should not be prevented.

As with letters, it is necessary to write an e-mail briefly and clearly and to separate paragraphs by missing a line. It is not appropriate to use letters specific to particular national alphabets in the address of the sender (the full name of the sender is often permanently placed alongside the e-mail address), since these can lead to the complete un-readability of some names. This applies to all aspects of electronic mail. The subject and the text itself should also be written in Czech without diacritics. If a text is being sent which may be less comprehensible without diacritics or which is expected to undergo further correction or work, it is more suitable to attach it as a Word file. The same applies also for more complex

formatted texts with tables or indentation and bullet-points in paragraphs, which are not suitable for copying into e-mail. It is better to send these texts as an attachment and write the e-mail itself very simply. It is never, however, appropriate to send attachments with only an empty e-mail or even without indicating the subject. The addressee must at least be briefly informed about what is in the attachments and who is sending them, otherwise he may discover, often after a long time, that the mail was not intended for him. Lengthy attachments are best compressed. Addressees using Apple computers sometimes have problems opening MS Word files and can open files saved in RICH TEXT FORMAT (*.rtf) more easily.

It is not recommended that attachments be opened directly. It is better to copy files on to a hard-disk, check their security using a suitable anti-virus programme and only then open them. Attachments will be most easily located if they are stored into a special sub-address book under the name indicating the sender and date of receipt in the format YYMMDD. Received and sent e-mails should be saved in mailboxes without attachments, because given a larger volume of correspondence, attachments take up too much space. You can separate an e-mail from its attachments by sending it to your own address and erasing the original e-mail with the attachments.

Mail programmes offer the option of copying messages received into the reply. This option may be effectively used when you are writing a commentary or notes directly into a text received. In WORD documents, notes may be differentiated using a coloured font or background, in e-mail it is recommended to miss a line before the note and after it and a note "Comment 1 / 2 / 3 by K.H." or a striking line of symbols, e.g. *************** or @@@@@@@@@@@@@@. It is not enough to rely on the fact that some mail programmes mark each line copied with the < symbol, the number of which increases with each copying. If a text is exchanged four times, the original line is mark <<<<. Sometimes, however, this marking fails and differentiating between the original and new text is arduous or impossible. Copying the original text should not be misused, because it is not pleasant to receive an e-mail with ten pages of correspondence from five people, in which the only thing of importance is only the first message and the signature.

The e-mail inbox should be checked often, ideally several times a day. During a period of absence it is appropriate to use automatic information for senders that the addressee is away from the workplace and correspondence received will be dealt with on his return. E-mails received must be responded to quickly even in cases where it is not possible to fulfil the sender's requirements at once. It is always possible, however, to confirm receipt and indicate when the matter is likely to be dealt with. The simplicity of internet communication precludes the excuse that there was no time to reply.

E-mail addresses should be simple and should derive as far as possible from the name of the addressee, and the domain from the name of the workplace. Institutional addresses should be created in a unified way, ideally using only the name. Only in a case of duplicate names should initials be used for further differentiation. Christian names or nicknames are not the best choice for e-mail addresses. It is entirely inappropriate to use one address for several workers. Their differentiation by name in brackets before the actual address is not displayed when group messages are sent and the recipient receives correspondence which cannot be passed on to the addressee. E-mail addresses should be easily locatable on the workplace web-page. This requirement is fulfilled only by using alphabetical lists of employees from the whole workplace and alphabetical lists of employees from the department. It is not suitable to rely on search engines because the precise name may not be available.

Inappropriate forms of address, poor formulation of requests or poor translation may in some cases threaten further collaboration. It is therefore appropriate to consult on the conception of the letter with more experienced workers or with a superior who can judge the level at

which the correspondence should proceed. No one should consider the adoption of some contacts by a superior as a lack of trust or loss of prestige. In certain cases, the best formulation of a request may only be selected after great experience. An offer of collaboration or compensation may also only be made by a worker with the necessary competencies.

An exchange of information also proceeds through discussion in person by telephone. Personal discussion even with close collaborators should take place at a previously agreed time. A telephone call asking if a partner is free or when it would suit him to meet is sufficient. If the subject of discussion is known, or if a request for collaboration or information will be made, it is appropriate to inform the partner. He can thus prepare for the discussion or invite another participant. Often a well-prepared discussion may prevent the quick refusal of a request which need not have occurred if the person asked had had time to prepare his position. It is especially vital to announce a visit outside your own workplace. Unannounced visits even to close colleagues and friends in the workplace are rarely welcomed and sometimes cannot be realised. It is always better to ask directly how long those being visited can devote to the visit. The agreed date, time and duration of the visit must be kept to.

When telephoning, the caller must clearly introduce himself, giving name and workplace, not to the switchboard operator, but to the person being called or his secretary. In the same way, the recipient of a phone-call should introduce himself by name or workplace (e.g. an operator "Medical Faculty", a secretary "Dean's Office", but the Dean with his own name). Taking a call with the words "Hello / Yes / How may I help you?" do not belong among the most suitable. When telephoning it is appropriate to ask whether we are interrupting the person we are calling and when it would be better to call back. As before personal meetings, in more complex cases it is helpful to send the question by e-mail, fax or post, or at least by phone and offer the possibility of further discussion. The method of communication should be chosen by the more senior partner. The person called should not consider it inappropriate to ask the caller to call back later if they have a visitor or a meeting. Constantly picking up the phone disrupts a meeting in progress and does not show politeness to the visitor.

Another form of communication is the passing of messages. Do not rely on your memory and oral arrangements. For colleagues from the same workplace it is appropriate to write a brief memo indicating from whom, when it was picked up and who is passing it on. The simplest method is pass messages through the network or by sending an e-mail, as long as the sender is sure that the addressee works with the electronic mail regularly and there is not risk that he will not open his in-box for two weeks. A worker who missed a caller should be informed about the call or visit even if the caller has said that he will telephone again or come later. It is impossible to guess how urgent the contact is and whether it is in the interests of the person who missed the caller to prepare for the meeting or to call back himself.