

I recently read a publication entitled “Giving Guidance By Email” written by a group of career counselors in the UK in 2004. After reading it, I found that the main part was missing: **E-counseling takes necessary innate skills and personal attributes for one to be effective.** The article was broken into 4 parts: “*Before opening the email*”, “*On opening the email*”, “*Preparing a response*”, and “*Afterwards*”, an operational “how-to” speckled with legalese, backing up computers, confidentiality issues, and everything that should be a given in any business operation in today’s electronic age, and especially in the business of e-counseling.

With the above being a given, I have written a real-world experience of the way e-counseling actually and ideally plays out. The 4 key elements to e-counseling have to do with innate personal characteristics combined with operational skills absolutely necessary for one to be effective: The innate attributes one must possess are: **relationship building skills** coupled with **empathy** (basically the foundation of any effective counselor). The operational skills one must have are: expert **business writing skills** and exceptional **organizational skills**. These 4 elements must be used in concert with each other, with *every* email exchanged, in order to achieve effective e-counseling.

### **Building a Relationship**

E-Counseling is essentially **relationship-building**, using email as your medium. It should follow the same **common sense** as does building a relationship in person. An expert level of tact and highly developed empathic writing skills are absolutely necessary if you are the one reaching out to a client, especially to give constructive criticism. On the other hand, if clients are contacting *you* for assistance, a **prompt reply** is necessary within 24 hours, and will go a long way in the 1<sup>st</sup> step to building the relationship. Flex schedules make this part easier, yet if you are in an office M-F 9-5, a morning email to an afternoon request would work just as well. If you can begin the e-counseling with a face to face meeting, that’s great and surely acts to build the relationship, but even if you never meet face to face, you **should be able to create a very similar relationship you would have in person.** In a pure email environment, **no more than 24 hours should pass from their 1<sup>st</sup> request**, because they need to know this is a viable form of communication that will, in the long run, ultimately benefit them as much as face-to-face counseling, due to the *response time alone*, as well as the *electronic media that is exchanged*.

Always begin with **thanking clients** for getting in touch, for whatever reason it is. Use a very welcoming yet 100% professional approach in your first couple exchanges to elicit a positive response from the start, it’s the foundation of your relationship. Then go into the some of the services you can offer, and end with questions that will further clarify what it is they are seeking exactly. It usually takes about 2 email exchanges to assess their needs fully, before you are able to give them all the appropriate resources. Another thing to remember is to always be the last to **respond with a time frame of when you will get back to them**, this shows you have heard their requests and gives you the necessary time to make sure you cover all their needs in your next email. Additionally, getting back to them (at the time you let them know in advance), builds the relationship, as they know they can count on you to do what you say you are going to do, which conveys professionalism, organization and care, ultimately building trust.

## Business Writing Skills

Possessing finely honed business writing skills is a large part of e-counseling, obviously. One reason you need to have top notch business writing skills, not to mention formatting skills, is when **critiquing resumes & cover letters**. Most people are not experts at resumes, and a critical component of being an effective Career Counselor is the ability to take what they have built so far, be able to polish it with ease & efficiency, then deliver a product that your clients will be able to continually amend and use for years to come. Delivering a product, as opposed to just trying to explain what it is they need to do to make it perfect, saves each of you a tremendous amount of time, since you are the expert in formatting and editing resumes, and they have already taken their best shot at it. This goes along the metaphorical lines of ‘teaching your client how to fish’, as opposed to fishing for them. Once they have the expertly created document, based upon their original, then they will be able to amend it as needed for the rest of their life. Accordingly, this sets the tone for you as an expert in your field, thus commanding respect and appreciation from your clients almost immediately, the groundwork for positive career counseling experiences for clients & counselors alike.

Though, exemplary writing skills alone won’t make you effective at e-counseling. You must innately have a gift for conveying your exact thoughts in the most appropriate ways through writing, while gauging near flawlessly, how your thoughts will be received. This is done **by re-reading your drafted emails at least 3** times or more, and making changes each time to further **clarify and eliminate any uncertainty** in your text. You must strive for perfection in each email you send, not taking any one of them lightly. This doesn’t mean you cannot use humor when completely appropriate, or praise, or even constructive criticism. *Anything* you need to convey, when done so professionally and 100% appropriate to the situation, can be received in the way you intended nearly 100% of the time. This is the caveat, “appropriate to the situation”, because each person *brings* with them, a different situation, thereby making these e-counseling guidelines difficult to create. This is why it is imperative that you have innate abilities in writing emails that are *always* well received.

How your emails are received should already be something that you already know about yourself. Email communication has surpassed telephone usage in the business world, and with so much experience in writing business correspondence (via email) you should know how your emails are generally received. If you are often frustrated at the amount of confusion you create with your emails (or your own confusion in reading other’s emails), then this is a good indicator that email communication may not be one of your strong points. I have a colleague in a different industry who believes that emails are a terrible form of communication due to 1) emails are ‘taken wrong’ so much of the time, and 2) that people may say in an email what they wouldn’t say in person. I can tell you right here, if this is the way *you* feel, then you should *never* attempt e-counseling.

## Empathy

The one point that assuages the two problems outlined above (confusion with emails & over-frankness), is the empathy characteristic, which is something you are born with and cannot be learned. If you are born with this, then you can continually hone this trait (and will naturally *want to* continually hone) for the rest of your life. Empathy should be used in every situation, from someone distraught with emotion, to someone elated by their accomplishments, to someone frustrated with them self and attempting to take advantage of your good will. Here is a quote from the article mentioned above that I thought nicely summed up empathy, as it relates to e-counseling:

***“Empathic people... construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks and various keyboard characters ...to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They***

*estimate just how long is too long. Essentially they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their audience...*" (Suler, 2003).

I trained with a handful of male and many female counselors purely on in-person counseling and there are as **many counseling styles as there are people!** Personally, I use a smile icon by my name at the end of the email, followed by my standard professional signature with the MS by my name. I use the smile as my trademark to impart a warm and completely helpful attitude which elicits more information from clients. In person, I use my real smile, along with open body language, both help to build the relationship. It must not be overlooked that you **need to be an effective counselor in every medium**, be it in person or though email; they are not mutually exclusive. They are integrated and *are who you are*, acting with integrity, professionalism, empathy and genuineness, in all aspects of your counseling relationship.

## Organization Skills

Organizational skills are a key element in the development, and building of, the relationship. With the next set of email exchanges, you need to be able to quickly assess your client's situation and **provide the necessary resources** with ease and efficiency. These will be *documents* you have in your computer files, *web addresses* they should access, and *verbiage* to assist with their needs. After e-counseling regularly you will find many of the same concepts are being conveyed. You will then be able to create some **standard verbiage** you can paste into an email to save a ton of time, but this pasted verbiage must be read and re-read and edited flawlessly to fit the current client's situation. Every client's situation is different.

After many exchanges, you will have covered a great deal of material, and there will come the time you 'set them free' to work on all the items addressed. There can be many months that pass before you email with them again, this is where your expert organizational skill come into play most significantly. Your emails **are an integral part your case notes**, in addition to your **unedited case notes** that you keep 100% confidential. **You need to refer to both before any further new correspondence.** If not, you will appear as though you don't know what you are talking about – which you may not, until you read through your previous correspondence. I use a combination of Excel and Outlook to achieve this most efficiently. If they send a new email without replying to the last one, then I look up the date of our last correspondence in my case notes in Excel, then find my last email to them in Outlook, hitting 'reply-all' and pasting their new message above the older correspondence. This way we are both on the same page, and they can be held accountable for anything they were supposed to do since the last exchange. It takes discipline and attention to detail to do this EVERY TIME, but it is the only way to keep people to task.

To sum this up, if *they email you* out of the blue with something, you need to be able to easily and quickly access the former emails to see where it is you left off. This email out of the blue is the perfect opportunity for you to address the items on which they were supposed to follow up, moreover, the fact that you 'remembered' takes your email relationship to the next level. If you are like me, and have 100's of email clients, there is no way you could ever remember 5% of the tasks and topics covered with each client. However, when you refer to all of your previous email exchanges, as well as your confidential case notes, you -in essence- have remembered and it shows in the largest way that you truly care about your clients, which you do, and which you show by **knowing their situation in depth, no matter how much time has passed.** The same principle applies when reaching out to them, out of the blue, with a follow up to your last exchange. Another reason to be completely organized in your case notes is to be able to recall or look up people who would be good for jobs that cross your desk, in order to refer them; this goes without saying as a strong relationship builder. The key here is that you **do care about your clients**, and that is why you take the necessary time & energy to keep their sacred life-information organized and always **handled with care.**