

Chapter 6.6

Instant Messaging (IM) Literacy in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses instant messaging (IM) as a valuable digital tool that has influenced business communication practices at least as much as e-mail. It argues that IM's characteristics of presence awareness, synchronicity, hybridity, and interactivity create a unique set of writing and reading experiences. These functional qualities both require and hone high-level writing and reading skills, which are used powerfully in communicative multitasking. The authors believe that IM should be sanctioned in the workplace and that IM use should be a subject of focused training; to that end, they provide a practical, literacy-based training sequence that can be adapted to various settings.

INTRODUCTION

Instant messaging (IM) is a primarily one-to-one text-based communication platform that also enables group interactions; it is highly popular among many Internet users and is ubiquitous among young adults. Currently businesses are hiring members of the "IM generation" as their newest, most computer-savvy employees, who are transferring their social IM skills to business settings. Flynn and Kahn (2003) projected that as many as 530 million people would use IM by the year 2006 (p. 187); many of these would be teenagers (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Although not included in these statistics, IM also can be accessed via some cell phones and personal digital assistants—increasing its use, popularity, and impact.

Not surprisingly, then, many businesses use IM through both enterprise-level and Internet-based IM clients. The International Data Corporation estimated there would be 229 million corporate IM users by 2005 (Miller, 2001, p. 208), and much IM use is practical and work-based. In their research, Isaacs, Walendowski, Whitaker, Schiano, and Kamm (2002, pp. 17-18) found that the primary use (62%) of IM in the workplace was for conversations about work, which included work talk, doing work, and work-related talk, while simpler tasks of scheduling and coordination (31%) were a secondary use (see also Handel & Herbsleb, 2002). Alarming, however, some businesses actively ban IM use in the office, ignoring or not understanding its benefits in terms of connecting employees. In particular, employees benefit from IM in settings where workers are dispersed geographically, within a building, or across a corporate structure. In both traditional and virtual workplaces, IM is versatile and interpersonally interactive, supplementing the telephone and e-mail and providing inexpensive, accessible communication.

These predictive statistics for IM usage are staggering, and they suggest how powerfully a digital tool like IM can change communication practices in the workplace. In fact, IM has enabled remarkably complex communication skills that belie its seemingly simple technology and uses. Baguley (2002) claimed that: "IM will not fundamentally change the way we work like e-mail did." We disagree. IM has already produced fundamental changes to the workplace, comparable to e-mail, by virtue of the literacy skills and communicative multitasking capabilities of each person who uses it. Such capabilities, which we will define and describe in this chapter, represent skills that employers can leverage for contemporary workplace practices. We argue that employers not only should sanction and provide IM connections, but also should train employees to use IM more effectively for their workplace settings. Thus, we also present practical training material for engaging IM's communicative functionalities

and conveying the business's communication priorities to its employees.

BACKGROUND

Historically, IM has existed in one form or another for over 30 years, which has implications for the number of users who have developed the unique IM literacy skill sets described in this chapter. IM has its natural home in the workplace as it initially was developed in a work setting to meet early computer programmers' needs for one-to-one communication. Indeed, one primitive form of IM called *write* existed on large mainframe UNIX computers as far back as 1975. The protocol enabled computer operators to inform each other of operations that might affect the entire mainframe, but most likely they also used it for social chat.¹

Most contemporary IM clients also provide a variety of new media affordances like voice and visual communication, personal calendars, Weblog interfaces, and such Web services as newsfeeds, weather, and current events—any of which may be valuable for workplace settings. However, in this chapter we focus primarily on text-based, default one-to-one, and selective one-to-group "chat." Text-based chat is IM's most basic, oldest, and most commonly used feature for interactive communication from which all its other features derive or diverge. IM users are connected through a common server via client software, and they "find" each other through their registration or user-supplied nicknames. Any IM software produces text boxes through which participants "talk" to one another. Upon logging into the IM client through an intranet or Internet connection, an IM user can see others who are logged-on and part of their acquaintance or "buddy" network.

An IM platform is like a telephone in that it enables one-to-one synchronous conversation;² yet it also is like e-mail in that it can be answered at one's convenience. Like a telephone call, IM requires

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