Chapter XXVI
Writing Research into Professional E–Mail Communication

Kirstie Edwards
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Simeon Yates
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Anne-Florence Dujardin
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Geff Green
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

ABSTRACT

A healthy balance between social and task-oriented activities helps teamwork. In virtual teams, e-mail texts must often carry both task-oriented and socio-emotional communication between individuals. While some theories of computer-mediated communication suggest socio-emotional exchange may not be well supported in e-mail communications, research demonstrates that individuals, nevertheless, achieve this. However, the lack of unplanned informal exchanges in virtual teams communicating by e-mail may still hinder team performance. We compared adaptations in socio-emotional content of e-mail communications in academic and commercial team writing contexts. Results suggested a task-oriented focus in the commercial team culture and an even social-task balance in the academic team culture. Our research leads us to recommend a more conversational style in professional e-mail writing. Additionally in virtual team working, we recommend encouraging face-to-face contact, allocating time specifically for social exchanges and making information about colleagues available to each other.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on semi-virtual team writing projects in an academic and a commercial environment. Team performance peaks and declines with increasing group cohesion, suggesting an optimal balance between sociability levels in the team and dedication to the goal. Socio-emotional communications, which help to develop group cohesion or a sense of team spirit, thus benefit team performance (Argyle, 1994; Hyland, 1998; Barker et al., 2000; Panteli, 2004) and are therefore relevant to virtual team management. Our research has used content analysis of the socio-emotional components of e-mail exchanges during writing projects to explore the teams' task and social orientations, which we describe as the team cultures. Studying adaptations of e-mail behaviour with writing influences such as purpose, receiver and context, describes the team cultures and has the potential to inform on social influences and behavioural norms. Before describing our research, we first review the relevant literature underpinning our approach.

E-MAIL, PERFORMANCE AND SOCIABILITY

Team Culture and Performance

Teamwork requires both task and socially-oriented activities. While task-oriented activities are essential to achieve team goals, it is also important to understand the impact of the social dimension on team performance. We discuss here evidence from the literature suggesting that the balance between task and socio-emotional dimensions in teams affects the welfare of the group.

Kelly and Duran (1985) define group cohesion as "the extent to which members of a group stick together, like and respect one another and feel unified" (p. 186). These researchers studied the cohesiveness and performance of seven groups of students working on problem-solving tasks, for which they had to prepare an oral and written report. Using Bales and Cohen's adjective rating method, they derived a group average score from member scores of perceived behaviour rated on three dimensions: dominant vs. submissive, friendly vs. unfriendly and instrumental vs. emotionally expressive. They interpreted group cohesion from close clustering of scores for members' perceptions of one another and themselves on these dimensions. Groups with either very high or low group cohesion scores did not perform well, from which the researchers concluded that an optimal level of group cohesion might exist; they caution, however, that the study was small in scale.

Evans and Dion (1991) completed a meta analysis of 16 studies on group cohesion and performance. The performance of teamwork in these studies was easily measurable, for example the performance of a sports team. The results may not be applicable, therefore, to real work groups, such as virtual writing teams, where performance is less overtly measurable. The researchers also point out that results may be influenced by different methods used to assess group cohesiveness and by the retrieval bias of only studying published research. However, their results clearly suggest a positive relationship between group cohesion and performance. Mortensen and Hinds (2001) studied 24 teams and found that shared identity was significantly associated with performance, and Timmerman and Scott (2006) have shown that communicative predictors affect virtual team outcomes in terms of perceived cohesiveness, trust and satisfaction. In their study of global virtual teams in a high tech multinational organization, Tucker and Panteli (2003) found that the teams which worked well included a "social and fun element in their computer-mediated interactions, which appeared to have helped in creating stronger relationships" (Tucker & Panteli, 2003; Panteli, 2004 , p. 76).

Also of particular significance to the social dimension of working is the lack of opportunity for informal communication offered in virtual workplaces (Keyzerman, 2003). In their study

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