

Chapter 6.9

Trust in Computer–Mediated Communications: Implications for Individuals and Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the concepts of trust as they relate to computer-aided communications. The author defines trust for interpersonal and for inanimate technology, identifies common factors affecting quality of meaning in communication, and identifies ways businesses can foster and enhance trust independent of the medium of communication.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore trust as it relates to computer-aided communications, commonly electronic-mail. There are four objectives for this chapter: (a) to comprehensively define trust as it appears in the scholarly literature, both for human interpersonal trust and for inanimate

technology trust; (b) to explore the essence of communications, identifying the common factors that affect the quality of meaning in communicative interactions; (c) to compare and contrast trust in different forms of communication media; and (d) to offer some thoughts on what can be done in the business world to foster and enhance trust, independent of the communication medium chosen.

TRUST

Trust is a contextual phenomenon commonly applied to casual conversation without conscious knowledge of what the construct means or how it manifests in daily interactions. This suggests that trust is a latent variable in the communications process since many people are not conscious that what they say and how they say it can affect their

trust relationships with others. Scholars often debate how to operationalize trust and, consequently, how to measure whether an individual displays and demonstrates trust. While the definitions of trust vary, there is agreement that its meaning is situationally or contextually based (McKnight & Chervany, 1996; McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998), which further suggests that how trust is operationalized is partly a function of the object upon which trust is being placed.

Rotter (1971, p. 443) suggested that “the entire fabric of our day-to-day living, of our social order, rests on trust—[from] buying gasoline, paying taxes, going to the dentist, flying to a convention—almost all of our decisions involve trusting someone [or something] else.” Other scholars have noted that trust is central to all social transactions (Dasgupta, 1988), reduces transaction effort (Bromiley & Cummings, 1995), and is classified as an important component of social systems (Arrow, 1974). Trust has been cited as a vital form of social capital within social systems (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995), since “without trust ... everyday social life ... is simply not possible” (Good, 1988, p. 32).

Much of the trust literature, particularly in the area of organizational theory and management, has focused on interpersonal trust where the object of trust is another individual. This form of trust, interpersonal trust, is most commonly defined using the research of Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995, p. 712), who suggest that interpersonal trust is:

... the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.

Other definitions frame trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau,

Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). The trust that one individual places in another may fluctuate during the course of a relationship based on a variety of external stimuli. That is, trust is not a naïve faith that a party takes for granted, based on an interaction that occurred in the distant past (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003). Instead, individuals examine new information about those with whom they interact and decide if they should increase or decrease their trust in that individual (McEvily et al., 2003). Using Mayer et al.’s (1995) interpersonal trust definition, we can state that the evaluation of another’s trustworthiness is a function of three antecedents: ability, benevolence, and integrity. The key difference between trustworthiness and trust is that trustworthiness is a *perceived characteristic of the trustee*, while trust is a *psychological state of the trustor* (Saparito & Lippert, 2006). Trust becomes relevant when individuals develop dependencies on, and vulnerabilities to, the actions and decisions of others (McEvily et al., 2003).

Levin, Whitener, and Cross (2006) found differences in an individual’s willingness to trust another when they classified relationships into new, intermediate, and older relationships. In their research, they also found that in newer relationships, the basis for trust was gender parity, perhaps as a function of communication or personal style, that behavioral expectations that result from moderate social interaction affected intermediate relationships, and that a personal knowledge of shared perspectives (values, beliefs, perceptions, and environments) was linked to older relationships. This suggests that how individuals behave and reinforce trust, by communicating, may serve as a moderator for trusting relationships. Zahra (2003, 2005) suggested that familial and kinship ties encourage trust as a function of the depth of the relationship. In a recent study, Zahra, Yavuv, and Ucbasaran (2006) suggested that managers can build trust relationships with individuals and groups through solicitation of ideas, problems, and questions. This communication strategy has

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