Chapter 9
E-Mail and Work Performance

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ABSTRACT

E-mail provides organizations with detailed and timely information that cuts across hierarchical levels and departmental boundaries. The speed, asynchronicity and "one-to-many" aspects of e-mail can lead to efficiencies such as reduced office administration leading to both time saving and management rewards. At the same time, e-mail might create information overload, e.g., when information exceeds the worker's ability to process it. E-mail effect on work performance is bound to (a) e-mail features –quantity, scope, and intensity; (b) individual level characteristics; and (c) organizational context. Different profiles of these aspects enhance or reduce work effectiveness (positive work performance) while at the same time generate work stress and distress (negative work performance).

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, information and communication technologies have been rapidly adopted in the workplace, providing access to increasing amounts of both internal and external information and providing the infrastructure for within and between organization communication. An important internet application is electronic mail (e-mail) that has become a frequent channel for organizational communication. Being asynchronous (Thomas et al., 2006), textual (Tyler & Tang, 2003), shared (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006), traceable (Ducheneaut & Watts, 2005) and efficient (Renaud, Ramsay, & Hair, 2006), e-mail based communication is often considered (the) single most convenient platform for providing task related information aiming to transmit information (Everton, Mastrangelo & Jolton, 2005). It can be used as a "one-to-one", or "one to many" communication route. Through forwarding messages it allows both direct and indirect messaging and contextualization of messages by including past responses. Before e-mail, communication at the

workplace took place primarily through face-to-face conversations, phone calls or written/printed letters and memos (Whittaker et al., 2006; 2007). E-mail has reduced the use of other channels, and facilitated the transference of more messages and information. It is evident that e-mail features are critical to work life and produce desirable and undesirable effects on work performance (Mano & Mesch, 2009; Karr-Wisniewski & Ying, 2010).

Advancing from the early utilization focus theories (Goodhue, 1995) through bounded rationality (March and Simon, 1958) and up to the productivity paradox (Landauer, 1995) along with the individual-technology "fit" (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995), it is evident that e-mail features are critical factors to work life, producing desirable and undesirable effects on work performance (Mano & Mesch, 2009; Karr –Wisniewski & Ying, 2010).

The analysis of e-mail features is related to the impact of information flow (Thomas et al, 2006) information content (Belloti et al., 2005) and skills (e.g. Storey & Quintas, 2001) partly because of e-mail overload (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Soucek & Moser, 2010). Some studies refer to the positive or negative effects of e-mail overload employees considering individual level factors as well as their organizational position that influences how e-mail is evaluated either as necessary or as a burden (Bontis, et al., 2002; Belloti et al., 2005; (\Mano & Mesch, 2009). Recent studies also explain the link between e-mail features and work performance (Edmunds & Morris, 2000) on the basis of organizational level variations (Taylor, Fieldman & Altman, 2008; Mano & Mesch, 2009)

The renewed interest to link between e-mail features and work performance (Karr-Wisniewski & Ying, 2010) stems from the increased importance of information flow to productivity (Thomas et al. 2006) because individual level variations in technology skills and demography, along with job level have all become central aspects to the fit between e-mail features and work performance (Edmunds & Morris, 2000; Taylor, Fieldman &

Altman, 2008; Mano & Mesch, 2009) mainly through a focus on e-mail overload (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006). The multi-level approach assists in assessing the predictive power of e-mail use on the positive – work effectiveness – and negative effects – stress and distress – of work performance (Bontis, et al., 2002; Belloti et al., 2005; Mano & Mesch, 2009).

Communication channels differ in the "richness" of the information they provide, e.g., multiple cues (verbal and non-verbal) and immediate feedback (Rice 1992; Whittaker et al., 2006; 2007). According to the media-richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), the richest media is face-to-face communication. It provides both verbal and non-verbal cues of the information transmitted, followed by the telephone (that provides verbal cues only) and textual communication. Hollingshead & Noshir (2002), focusing on aspects of the "media richness" theory, develop the notion that social influence (from co-workers and supervisors), time and distance between communicators, shape employees' preference for a specific medium. Their preference is usually for a medium that its "social presence" fits the task they wish to accomplish (Taylor, Fieldman & Altman, 2008). The technological characteristics of the channel shape media richness and determine the subjective perception and evaluation of channel fit (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). At the same time, information flow (Jackson, Dawson & Wilson, 2003; Belloti et al., 2005) has been found in earlier studies to generate mixed – positive as well as well as negative – outcomes at work. As to positive effects, one early commentary notes, e.g., that "e-mail made it possible to do more work, but not necessarily to do work more productively", thus presenting the "productivity puzzle" of information society and concerns regarding the "productivity paradox" (Landauer, 1995, p. 75). As a result, over time, studies refer to both positive and negative effects of e-mail overload on employees considering the individual level as well as organizational factors that influence how e-mail is used, managed

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