

Chapter 16

Effects of Email Utilization on Higher Education Professionals

Nancy M. Chase
Gonzaga University, USA

Becky Clegg
Consultant, USA

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines the impact of email as a primary communication technology upon the perceptions and work behaviors of higher education professionals who support university administrative functions. Based on the interviews and observations of 23 participants, key themes emerged regarding the relationship of email to the interactions of higher education professionals. Findings are presented in three sections: (1) impact on productivity, (2) impact on social interactions, and (3) impact on well-being. The professionals who participated in this study articulated the importance of face-to-face interaction particularly in complex situations; they recognize the need to manage email sender expectations to deal with their own work stresses, and strive to temper the negative impact of constant disruption by email on workplace productivity.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of network technologies and communication applications enables individuals to connect with others regardless of location, to view information stored on servers worldwide, and to work any hours, from any where. Moreover, asynchronous communication technologies such as email and instant messaging have accelerated the exchange of information beyond what could have been imagined even ten years ago. Collie

(2005) proposed that contemporary technology tools of the Web, PDAs, laptops, pagers, cell phones, text messages, Blackberry®, and email messages can create stress in the workplace. Increasingly, knowledge workers wrestle with an overwhelming feeling of anxiety created by the communication explosion appropriately labeled email overload. Research has confirmed that excessive volumes of electronic messages can affect workers' health, emotional stability, and social interactions (Bellotti, Ducheneaut, Howard,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1954-8.ch016

Smith, & Grinter, 2005; Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Farhooman & Drury, 2002; Hall, 2004; Huang & Lin, 2009). Consequently, investigations based on work habits related to email usage may enable organizations to grapple with issues affecting the performance, productivity, and well-being of employees.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the use of email as a primary communication technology upon the work behaviors of higher education professionals who support university administrative functions. Although email usage has achieved ubiquitous status as a communication technology for personal use as well as for business use across a multitude of industries, relatively few studies have focused on this tool within the realm of higher education. This study, by design, sought out the perceptions of the professional staff in administrative departments. Qualitative methods typically focus on a limited number of individuals and cases, producing an abundance of in-depth information. This approach is “particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic” (Patton, 1990, p. 44), beginning with specific individual data and building toward general categories and patterns. The gathering of in-depth information is seen as appropriate by sociologists when minimal empirical attention has been given to a specific group (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000)—as is the case with academic administrative workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research conducted over the past 10 years focused on the overwhelming nature of electronic mail communication citing stress in the workplace, negative social behaviors, and diminished productivity among knowledge workers (Burgess, Jackson, & Edwards, 2003; Ducheneaut & Watts, 2005; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2002; Neustaetter, Bernheim Brush, Smith, & Fisher, 2005; Whittaker & Sidner, 1996). Smith (2008) reported

that the average employee spends between 90 minutes and two hours per day reading email messages. As the email inbox becomes cluttered with retained emails, incoming messages, irrelevant chain mail, and spam, workers may become victims of email overload or, at a minimum, face increasing frustration attempting to manage electronic communication in a disciplined fashion (Betts & Ouellette, 1995; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003b).

Multiple studies relating to email overload have emerged from the U.K. (Burgess, Jackson, & Edwards, 2005; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003a), but this topic has not generated much interest elsewhere until recently. Researchers report that the average corporate email user sends and receives approximately 156 messages per day, “and this number is expected to grow to about 233 messages a day by 2012” (Radicati Group, Inc., 2008, p. 4). One result of the explosive growth in email volume is that organizations increasingly face key decisions on how to address the monster of email (Dudman, 2003). At Loughborough University in England, Jackson conducted a series of research projects (Jackson et al., 2002; 2003a, 2003b; Jackson, Burgess, & Edwards, 2006) examining email tolerance levels, cost of email to organizations, and reduction of email defects through training of workers. Challenges identified in the studies included: poorly written email, email as a distraction, email used improperly (i.e., when face-to-face was warranted), and email carbon copy abuse. Jackson et al. (2003a) found that 65% of emails sent to recipients failed to provide enough information for the receiver to respond appropriately. Similarly, email messages may not provide the reader with enough information to accurately determine the context or tone (Whittaker, Bellotti, & Gwizdka, 2006). Consequently, the recipient faces additional pressure and frustration attempting to reach a satisfactory resolution to the communication (Burgess, Jackson, & Edwards, 2004).

13 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/effects-email-utilization-higher-education/68283

Related Content

An Empirical Study of the Virtual Simulation System Teaching Method in NC Machining

Jinping Li, Yongxiang Li, Huihuang Bao, Cong Yuand Haixia Guo (2020). *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction* (pp. 109-123).

www.irma-international.org/article/an-empirical-study-of-the-virtual-simulation-system-teaching-method-in-nc-machining/251823

Joy in Academia: The Systemic Role of Academia in Society

Germán Ulises Bulaand Sebastián Alejandro González (2018). *International Journal of Systems and Society* (pp. 1-12).

www.irma-international.org/article/joy-in-academia/210589

Organizational Communication: Assessment of Videoconferencing as a Medium for Meetings in the Workplace

Bolanle A. Olanira (2011). *Sociological and Philosophical Aspects of Human Interaction with Technology: Advancing Concepts* (pp. 58-79).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/organizational-communication-assessment-videoconferencing-medium/54133

Mobile Novelty Mining

Agus T. Kweeand Flora S. Tsai (2011). *Emerging Pervasive and Ubiquitous Aspects of Information Systems: Cross-Disciplinary Advancements* (pp. 298-321).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mobile-novelty-mining/52443

Super Soldiers (Part 1): What Is Military Human Enhancement?

Patrick Lin, Max Mehlman, Keith Abneyand Jai Gallriott (2019). *Human Performance Technology: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 61-81).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/super-soldiers-part-1/226556