

# Chapter 15

## Reflections of Professional Practice: Using Electronic Discourse Analysis Networks (EDANs) to Examine Embedded Business Emails

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### ABSTRACT

*Emails have become a central genre in business communication, reflecting both how people communicate and how they go about their professional practices. This chapter examines embedded business emails as reflections of the professional practices of the regulatory and policy department of a multinational based in London, UK. It argues that the nature of online communication in international organisations, with its high levels of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, requires multidimensional analytical approaches that are capable of capturing its complexity and dynamics. To this end, the chapter introduces electronic discourse analysis networks (EDANs) as one example of such approaches. It begins with a brief review of the literature that has informed the study reported on here before it discusses EDANs as its analytical framework. Using a group of embedded emails and a number of networked data sets, the chapter shows how EDANs can be used to further our understanding of professional online communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in email communication, with a particular focus on business contexts (Akar, 2002; Gains, 1999; Nickerson, 2000; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Turner, Grube, Tinsley, Lee, & O’Pell, 2006; among many others). Approaches to investigating

email in business communication have ranged from analysing emails as electronic media, through isolating their textual features, to examining the relationship between emails and their context of production and consumption (e.g. Akar, 2002; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000; Nickerson, 2000). Early studies showed a marked interest in determining the capability

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of emails as a means of communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lengel & Daft, 1988), concluding, *inter alia*, that they were less rich than other media (e.g. face to face) in terms of the possibilities they offered users. Important as these first studies were, they focused too narrowly on the richness of the medium, failing to examine emails in their context of use.

Later studies (e.g. Markus, 1994) brought context of use into consideration and managed to identify contextual factors that influence people's choice of media. The focus of attention thus shifted to the examination of factors such as corporate policies about the use of electronic media for communication (Markus, 1994), organizational practices (Nickerson, 2000), and interpersonal and power relationships (Hinds & Kiesler, 1995; Markus, 1994) that could influence media choice. Other studies have produced more linguistic analyses of emails by looking at their internal features in an attempt to discern whether they represented a new means of communication (e.g. Gains, 1999) or an emerging new genre (e.g. Gimenez, 2000). More recently, studies have taken a more socio-linguistic approach and have focused on the dialectical relationship between email, users, context and corporate culture, highlighting the interplay between email and communication purposes (e.g. Nickerson, 2000); email and corporate reality (Akar, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002); email, task demand, technology availability and organisational culture (Ho, 2011; van den Hoof, Groot, & de Jonge, 2005); and email, user proficiency and media packaging (Turner & Reinsch, 2007; 2011); among others.

Despite the plethora of studies that have been conducted since the late 1980s, there is still certain paucity in analytical methods that would allow us to understand the full complexity of email communication from a discursive perspective. For example, embedded emails, a frequent genre in contemporary international communication with their chain of messages that includes the message initiator, the middle messages and the message

terminator (Gimenez, 2006), constitute complex communicative practices that require rather sophisticated analytical methods to unpack their textual and communicative nature. In embedded emails intertextual and interdiscursive elements are central to message composition and message understanding as discursive realities in today's electronic corporate communication.

This chapter thus argues that the nature of online communication in international organisations requires multidimensional analytical approaches that can both cope with its complexity and capture its dynamics. In support of this argument, it reports on a study that followed a practice-oriented approach and used electronic discourse analysis networks (EDANs), a multidimensional analytical framework, in order to examine business emails as discursive representations of the professional practices and the procedures of a regulatory and policy department at a multinational corporation based in London, UK.

The chapter first presents a brief review of the research that has informed the study reported on here. Against this background, it presents and discusses EDANs as its analytical framework and analyses a number of embedded business emails. Next, the chapter describes the results of such an analysis, followed by an examination of the significance of the results. Finally, it concludes by drawing attention to the need for more discourse-oriented analytical methods such as EDANs which would allow us to gain a fuller understanding of the reality of professional online communication.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since the late 1980s the interest in email communication has grown considerably. Although early research isolated emails from their context of use in order to study them as a means of communication and determine their richness in comparison with other media (e.g. face-to-face) (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lengel & Daft, 1988), it did not

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