Chapter 18

Computer Mediated Communication: The Power of Email as a Driver for Changing the Communication Paradigm

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INTRODUCTION

Email has been with us now for a long time and is being increasingly adopted as a major communication tool in UK Higher Education establishments (colleges of higher and further education and universities). As the use of email grows, the effect on communication patterns needs to be established. This paper looks at current communication and working practices within a higher education institution in the UK (the author’s own). A survey has been conducted to elicit people’s feelings about the use of email and how they see future patterns of communication developing within the establishment. The questions that the survey set out to answer were as follows:

• Preferred methods of communication
• Advantages and disadvantages of each of the communication methods utilised at Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU)
• Efficiency of email to be
• Items not suitable for email transmission
• Ethical considerations in using email
• Who is contacted using email
• Increase or decrease of email usage in the future
The specific focus of the survey was to elicit how staff feel about the increasing dependence on the use of email within the institution, and these findings are discussed in the results section.

The paper will present a literature review of the area, the framework for the study, the methodology utilised, the results of the questionnaire, and conclusions.

**COMMUNICATION AND EMAIL**

A basic theoretical model of the communication process states that messages are “sent” and “received.” Confirmation of receipt and interpretation of the message indicates that it is a two-way communication process (Warner, 1996). Some major factors to be considered when choosing the communication method are as follows:

- **Effectiveness**—how do we measure this when using email?
- **Simultaneous reception of information by recipients**—what happens when people are temporarily unable to access their email due to technical problems?
- **Acknowledgement of receipt**—read receipts can be used to check how quickly the message has been read.
- **Speed**—how quickly does the information reach the recipients?
- **Cost of the process**—is it cost effective?

Increasingly, email has become a common mode of communication for many people, though exceptions must be made for those who do not have easy and regular access to the technology required. However, communications theorists argue there are problems with the use of email as the sole communication medium. Culnan and Markus (1987) suggested that a lack of face-to-face communication changes the intra- and interpersonal variables because of a lack of social context, and this will inevitably lead to problems understanding the message. Sproull and Kiesler (1986) argued that email was devoid of social cues and this would seriously affect communication patterns. Email provides neither audible nor visible cues to the communication process and as such can be seen as a relatively impoverished communication style. Recent developments (Bavelas et al., 1999) in the form of “emoticons,” typewritten symbols that imitate facial expressions, are helping to bring a visual dimension to email which was not previously there, for example: J [type : followed by ) ], L [type : followed by ( ]; however, the effectiveness of these “emoticons” is difficult to measure. They are not widely used in the UK HE environment where pressure and need to concentrate on speed of response limit developments of further dimensions to email. Hirscheim (1985) argued that one of the major benefits of using email is to support communication between people who are geographically distant, as is the case in this paper.

There are further problems with an email system in that it is not always possible to ensure that the recipient has received and read the message in an appro-
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