Gender Effects on Managerial Communication and Work Performance

Rita S. Mano, Department of Human Services, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

This study examines how email affects male and female managers’ work performance and stress. Drawing on theories of gender, technology and communication, and focusing on management positions we examine whether email has similar effects on men and women. It is shown that work performance is equally high among men and women but evokes more stress among women. The authors explain this as being due to women’s preference for face-to-face communication over technology-based media. Their results highlight the costs and benefits of both systems in management positions. These results provide a preliminary assessment of how technology-based communication gives rise to an “undercover” aspect of the gender divide in the workplace.

Email has been a vital communication medium for many years now. It provides speedy and efficient communication of information that can be easily and quickly created, edited, stored, discarded, organized, appended, and forwarded. Its “technical neutrality” has minimized possible communication distortions caused by differences in occupational, ethnic or gender features and expanded connections between individuals in different parts of the organization and/or different organizations (Ducheneaut & Watts, 2005). Thus transmission of information via email is also linked to work performance. Recent studies suggest that email has poorer communication cues which often generate lower, rather than higher, productivity (Moore et al., 2008). Nonetheless, use of information and communications technologies, work intensity and work performance are essentially related to individual characteristics.

The present study examines how email flow influences work performance and stress among men and women managers (Wasser- man & Richmond-Abbott, 2005; Bury, 2010), drawing on “gender-divide” assumptions. The results imply that preferences regarding technology-based communication may increase work performance but can also increase stress among women managers (Karr-Wisniewski & Ying, 2010). Management necessitates increased technology-based communication, in which email plays a significant role, possibly at
the expense of face-to-face interactions (Taylor, Feldman, & Altman, 2008).

Clearly, email communication and coordination facilitate work routines. Receiving and sending messages are important assets for work performance (Nesbit & Burton, 2007; Szostek, 2011; van Deursen, van Dijk, & Peters, 2010; Mano & Mesch, 2009). Nonetheless, when the information flow is greater than the recipient’s potential or willingness to respond, then the appearance of “fatigue syndrome” is likely possibly more among women who are reported to prefer face-to-face interactions (Oppenheim, 1997, p. 246).

Recent studies support the notion that women face both opportunities and obstacles in information technology (IT). Women, for example, use email for different goals than men (Flynn, Smith, & Freese, 2006) and women professionals seem to prefer ‘hybrid’ or ‘mixed skill’ positions and careers in which technical skills affect the rate of progress and job satisfaction in a “masculine” culture (Bury, 2010). The fatigue syndrome” though challenges evidence suggesting women use technology as much as men (Moore, Griffiths, Richardson, & Adam, 2008; Adams & Weiss, 2011) or that women’s interest in technology-related professions is increasing (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2007). Inevitably, some studies also indicate that the gender divide is not decreasing since “gender divide” experiences maybe related indirectly to initial gender differences in type of work, employment positions skills required (Debrand & Johnson, 2008), cultural and social backgrounds, human capital (UNESCO, 2005), lower levels of technical skills (Srinivas, 2011) and psychological tendencies preferences or others. Not surprisingly, women prefer to being employed in the more human-oriented aspects of technology. This preference reflects apparently their innate preference and skills for face-to-face communication skills such as flexibility, collaboration and negotiation (Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005; Coker, 2011; Srinivas, 2011) to the extent that, according to Hafkin (2006), a misfit between the gender digital divide and the overall divide may also affect the organization of work.

The present study re-evaluates the relationship between email flow, work performance and work stress (Joiner et al., 2006) among men and women managers, in an attempt to provide deeper insight into the digital divide paradigm and promote understanding of workplace communication advantages and disadvantages for women in management positions. Two areas of research: (a) the digital and gender divide affecting email use and flow of information; and (b) organizational studies on gender differences in management and communication style; have been combined. Using data collected from the Pew Internet Project (2004) we examine the effects of four email characteristics (extent, intensity, content, and increase) on men and women managers’ work performance and work stress, and address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Is the link between email flow and (a) work performance, (b) work stress different for men and women managers?

**RQ2:** How do the effects of email use add to our understanding of gender differences in the workplace?

**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Technology, according to Feenberg (2002), is either perceived as neutral or value-laden. As a neutral form, technology involves a high level of technical determinism and assumes the existence of absolute separation between means and ends. In the value-laden approach, technology leads to better social outcomes, and technological developments do not necessarily give rise to desirable social outcomes. Among such outcomes, for example, is the generation and perpetuation of “gendered” organizations, because a strong focus on technology has “masculine” connotations (Wacjman, 2004), and increases the potential of “masculine practices”. These may prevent women from achieving their full work potential because they may not prefer,
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