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 (HE) 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 chapter 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 utilized at Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU);
• Efficiency of email;
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?
- Acknowledgment of receipt—can read receipts 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?

Email can be viewed as primarily a sociotechnical system. A working definition of a sociotechnical system states that changes in one part of the system, be it technical or social, will affect the other parts and thus the system as a whole. A sociotechnical system is concerned with the interactions between the psychological and social factors and the needs and demands of the human part of the organization, and its structural and technological requirements (Mullins, 1999). Email satisfies the criteria for a sociotechnical system in that it consists of technology and the software needed to run the system, as well as operating within the social norms adopted by the organization choosing to use email as a communication tool. These social norms will help to determine the way in which email is used and the extent to which it will become a dominant communication form. The relative importance of each part of the system—the social and the technical—will vary between different institutions. When any new technology is introduced, it is important that the user population have a positive
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