Chapter 30
Functions and Strategies of Email Communication at the Workplace

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ABSTRACT
Email communication has been the communication medium for most organizations nowadays as the Internet has become a way of life for most people. To serve the purposes of communication in organizations, email is used to coordinate action, share information and satisfy social needs. This research was carried out to examine the patterns of email communication in a public higher education institution in Malaysia. A total of 86 emails consisting of 40 email chains and five one-way communication emails were collected over a period of four weeks. These emails were analyzed for functions and strategies used by the email writers. It was found that writers of email are aware of the strategies available for disseminating information and they used the strategies differently depending on the situation, the people involved in the interaction and the subject matter.

INTRODUCTION
Communication in organization serves three major purposes: to allow members to coordinate action, share information and satisfy social needs. Email communication has been the communication medium for most organizations nowadays as the Internet has become a way of life for most people. More and more businesses are capitalizing on the Internet to help market goods and services, get customers and increase networking.

In the context of workplace communication in Malaysian organizations, Bahasa Malaysia (BM), the official language is used as well as English. English is considered the language for business and trade and also the second language for those who were born during the colonial era. However, to those who were born after Bahasa Malaysia was accepted as the official language, (after Malaysia received her independence from the British), English might
not be a second language but may be a third or even a foreign language. Thus, most Malaysians are bilingual and some are multi-lingual and consequently, both BM and English are used in email communication. The increasing use of email as a communication medium in organizations has prompted a number of researchers to investigate email discourse. Habil and Rafik-Galea (2005) maintain that code switching instances in email messages are rather common when communicating among Malaysians. In fact, code switching was used as a manifestation of power because it allows the person having higher managerial positions to switch to another language to control the act of switching codes. Alsree (2000) pointed out that email messages range from highly informal to highly formal and that it has changed people’s habits of composing, planning and editing communication at work.

The research mentioned above were conducted within the business and manufacturing environment. Are there any differences in the email communication of a public, higher education institution? To answer that question, a mini research has been carried out to examine the patterns of email communication in a public higher education institution in Malaysia. It was carried out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the functions of email messages?
2. What are the strategies used in the email communication?
3. What other elements/factors influence the construction of email messages?

BACKGROUND

Email communication has been the preferred channel of communication, internal and external, for most organizations in Malaysia nowadays. To serve the purposes of communication in organizations, email is used to coordinate action, share information and satisfy social needs. A number of studies were carried out by researchers to examine the usage of email and to understand how people use email to communicate at the workplace. Habil and Rafik-Galea (2005) who investigated email discourse in Malaysian organizations, found that the language used in email communication in organizations reflected the expressive values of words. These values represent the social identity assumed by individual members in the organization. They also reported that organizational and local culture play important roles in shaping the electronic business discourse of organizations. Alsree (1997) reported that politeness as a face-saving strategy was one aspect that people consider when communicating via email. Habil (2003) summarized that there were two noticeable patterns of email in manufacturing organizations in terms of language style that are formal style of language and conversational style of language. This was also the findings of Gains (1999) who reported that certain types of messages were written in conversational style as opposed to the more formal one. In addition, Gimenez (2000) also stated that organizational members tend to write email messages using a more flexible register than both spoken and written language. Moreover, Jariah and Chong (2003) highlighted that writers of email in organizations were careful with their choice of words to show appropriate politeness and respect in order to maintain harmony at the workplace. Besides that, Abdullah (2006) also reported that writers of email were aware of their readers and made choices about the content, language code, register and tone in their email messages accordingly. This also includes the choice of the types of salutation and closing to use in the emails.

Other researchers who have investigated the use of email in organizations include Rice (1997), Sims (1996), and Ziv (1996). Rice (1997) investigated email messages of four organizations and found that writers of email combined elements of formal and informal discourse. Sims (1996) analyzed emails in two corporate workplaces and discovered that both companies showed evidence...