

## **Impact of email in organizational communication**

### **Introduction**

As early as in 1958, it was predicted that computing power would reduce middle management levels by Leavitt and Whisler(1958). The advent of desktop computing brought in 1980s autonomous knowledge workers and empowered clerical staff. And now the computers have been networked within organizations and across organizations and it has led to the emergence of new pathways for communications and virtual organizations. (eg.Mackenzie 1986; Hedberg, 1991; Baskerville et al, 1994) Electronic communication tools have become predominant in organizations and five years ago in 2000, there were 209 million business email users in U.S alone and this must have doubled by now. (The Industry Standard 2000). Interpersonal communications are an essential foundation upon which organizations are built as was observed by Barnard(1938) who said “ an organization is born when there are individuals who are able to communicate, and who are determined to engage in actions oriented towards a common goal”. It has been estimated that a manager spends 95% of his time in written and verbal communication. (Mintzberg 1973). It is essential that such technologies impacting upon the organizational is examined with greater attention it deserves.

### **Has emails replaced face to face contacts**

In a study reported in Jan 1995(Sullivan), it was found that e-mail users among the of the Florida House of Representatives, an information-intensive public organization,

preferred the just introduced system for document delivery, request for information and answering queries only and not for drafting documents, assigning tasks and making decisions. And it was also found that e-mail was less preferred than face to face interaction but more preferred than telephone, memos and letters. This observation was 10 years ago and in a public organization where formality is the norm.

It is undisputed fact that e-mail is used to replace time-consuming and expensive conventional workplace communication methods. It is not surprising therefore that 80 percent of all organizations now use e mail for business communication. It will continue to increase as the cost and resistance decline. (Louis 2002)

Interpretation of a message depends on the choice of communication method selected by the sender. The selection of communication media is an executive skill driven by the factors of expediency and efficacy. As a unique communication channel, e-mail enables creation and dissemination of messages in organizations. It is not just a medium between sender and receiver but could be a complex form of communication with multiple recipients and attachments. Thus features of e-mail include Listservs, Attachments, Clandestine communication and impersonal nature

The listservs are the electronic mailing lists used to reach a wide audience such as subordinates, work groups, teams, peers, departments and divisions even the entire organization with a single click of the mouse.

Attachments: Documents or files such as memo, letters, reports, photos, video clips add to strength of the message.

Clandestine communication: E mail features makes it possible to relay messages secretly.

Impersonal nature: It dispenses with the considerable discomfort when one has to engage in face to face altercation. The attacker just has to create a mean-spirited message and press the send button. The communications technology makes tough organizational jobs easy without much stress and anxiety of doing so in a face to face situation.

E-mail systems have therefore changed forever how people act in organizational communication. The days of managers dictating letters and employees in-box with overflowing inter-company memorandums are the thing of past. Just as in any other communication, e-mail messages reveal the characteristics of the message sender so the senders are generally cautioned to watch their grammar and to make their messages succinct and business like. Attention to emotional part of the messages is really challenging one as it is very difficult to handle effectively. For this reason e mail is a bad medium. Many organizational members will be insulted if the sender sends sensitive and emotionally-charged topics by e-mail. It only shows that the sender is too chicken to confront others face to face.

“E-mail is a wonderful time saving device. Despite its shortcomings, it is now a standard for business communication. You must, however, respect its deficiencies in conveying appropriate emotions or risk making mistakes with organizational members that are much harder to overcome than you might imagine” (Roster 1999)

Ineffective communication can make the giants fail and effective communication can make failed giants turn around. Lou Gestener, the former CEO of IBM, in his 2002 memoir” who says Elephants Can’t Dance”, testifies how critical communication was to IBM’s turn around. He has devoted 54 pages on memos he sent to employees as he had long back realized that it would be impossible to move IBM without winning the hearts and minds of people. (Teach, CFO Magazine, May 8 2006)

In order for the managers to become green lights for communications, it has suggested to following practices.

**Make Communications a two-way street-** They should maintain a healthy internal dialogue, through regular meetings, employee surveys, E-mail, intranets, and blogs and should respond to questions and also respond quickly. Complaints should be dealt with by meeting face to face preferably wherever possible. Meetings should ideally have Q&A component as people will have chances to interact which diffuse a lot of discomfort and hostility. Often people just want be heard.

**Hire an employee communications officer:** Of late, communications officers are being hired in either in corporate communications or H.R. It is not desirable to have under H.R. as it carries with it the negative features of policies, procedures, and legalese which most people want to run away from.

**Form a team of ambassadors:** Especially in a situation of change management, a team of employee ambassadors can be created drawn from different functions and levels across the organization, whose members can speak the language or jargon of the particular different groups, be it marketing, R & D, Sales, or assembly-line workers.

### **Write a story**

Writing a story of the core narrative of the change process like “here’s where we were, this is what happened to us, this is what we are doing about it now and this is what our vision is for the future, will soon become a common ground for communicating.

### **No holds barred**

The importance of the communication within an organization could be well understood from the case of Cadence Designs Systems reported in CFO Magazine, May 2006. This company which manufactures software and systems for chip design and testing holds 15 or 16 employee roundtables every quarter each hosted by a senior manager attended by 10 to 20 employees. Usually e-mails are sent in advance by randomly selecting attendees. No holds are barred on whatever questions they would wish to ask. An

employee asked why Cadence incurred \$30 million tax bill to repatriate \$500 million a year under the American Jobs Creation Act for which the explanation was “Cadence had good uses for the cash, and the tax bill was much lower than it would have been under normal circumstances” This would clearly show that internal communication became a higher priority for Cadence when Michel Fister became the CEO in 2004. especially when there was organizational change. In that company, Managers periodically undergo training in communications as it has to be a continual effort. ‘One can never do a good enough job’ is the watch word which constantly pushes one to a little more perfection every time. There has to be the feeling that one overly communicates as it is better than when one does not communicate.

### **Communication Richness**

Selection of communication channel depends upon its richness. There is no doubt that face-to-face communication is the richest form of communication provided it is between the right parties. Communication richness is determined by the different perspectives of cuelessness, bandwidth, and social presence. Cuelessness in communication channels is informational concept.(Rutler 1987)

A psychological closeness between the sender and receiver narrows as number of cues diminishes according to Rutler.(1987).” This communication channels can be distinguished in terms of their relative cuelessness. Rutler tacitly assumes that people prefer more usable cues and minimal psychological distance for most communication situations, and they tend to select those media that provide the most cues, and avoid "poor" media that display greater psychological distance” (Sullivan 1995)

However channel preferences can be determined by task situations which predispose the manager to select one medium over the other. If the media is not rich for the situation then it is known as lean. Thus lean media is deliberately selected if managers want to maintain ambiguity.

Next to the richness, is the concept of “bandwidth” or the range of communication modes that a medium can convey (Rice 1987, Rice & Steinfield, 1990) Media with limited capacity to transmit cues ( example, a letter) have narrower bandwidth than those which can carry more diverse set of cues ( for example, interactive video). Hence selection of communication channel is on the basis of the bandwidth, depending on the context of communication activity.

Another perspective is social presence which is based on the assumption of an individual's perception and evaluation of the channel rather than its technology alone. Social presence is best understood by characteristics of the channel that offer “psychological closeness” (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976) and that results in people orientation or by the interpersonal involvement. (Rutler, 1987). It can also refer to a person's communication style. As the person's perception of a communication channel depends on the interpersonal context or the situation's ambiguity, the channel selection depends up on the type of the communication activities or tasks required of a person within an organization.

### **Relevance of E mail and conclusion**

In the above media rankings discussed above, richest media are those that provide visual and auditory stimuli ( face to face and telephone) and the leanest media are those that provide only written stimuli( letter and e mail) E mail ranks midway between the rich media (of spoken) and the lean media (written)

E mail has the exceptional character of crossing over traditional boundaries between paper and electronic media. It demonstrates a degree of interaction akin to telephone even though it is in the written form analogous to written memo. Its qualities such as interactivity, asynchronicity and reliability makes it suitable for majority of communication tasks. Despite its lean level of channel richness, communication efficiencies offered by e-mail outweigh the expectations or preference based on face to face communication.(Sullivan 1995) Because of the fusion of attributes of low involvement as in writing and high involvement as in speed of interactivity, e mail has become the most preferred channel of communication.

However the fact remains that use and preferences for e-mail vary according to the type of communication activity in which one is engaged. The use of e-mail varies depending up on the position of a person in the organizational hierarchy. The communication technology like e-mail has had a telling impact in the last decade ever since it was introduced and it has become preferable to the older means of communication such as telephone and face to face. And the e-mail has now become a tradition until newer one, more efficient emerges. It has become an indispensable form of communication for the effect of speed and accuracy, efficiency in disposal of issues. Managers and staff need not stay glued to their seats any more and the managers and staff can act and interact with



each other remotely more efficiently than ever before. More over that the e mail has promoted organizational power and also its attendant organizational politics need not be overemphasized.

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