

Communicating Effectively Through Email

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Byron, K. (2008). Carrying too heavy a load? The communication and miscommunication of emotion by email, Academy of Management Review, 33, 309 – 327.*

Within the past few years, email has become an increasingly widespread form of communication. Most of us now use email on a daily basis, both for business and personal use. Not only is email used as a supplement to traditional forms of communication, such as speaking in person or on the phone, in some relationships email is used almost exclusively. Using email for communication has several distinct benefits for organizations, it:

- allows people to communicate across long distances
- Is less expensive than long distance calls or in-person meetings
- Increases information flow between co-workers, clients, and customers

Despite the many advantages email offers, there are also negative consequences that can result from the increased reliance on email for communication. Employees report feeling less connected to their co-workers because of reduced interpersonal interaction. Additionally, communicating through email can often result in miscommunication.

Why Miscommunication Occurs

Whether they mean to or not, users both express and interpret emotion through email. Because email communication does not include the non-verbal cues such as facial-expressions, pitch, volume, and intonation of speech that we

often use to understand someone's emotions, there can be problems with interpretation.

Consequences of Miscommunication

Miscommunication can result in an email being perceived as more negative, more neutral, or sometimes more positive than intended. For example, someone receiving a succinct, to-the-point email may interpret the sender as being upset or angry, when in fact the sender was just very busy and did not have time to write a longer message. If this communication had taken place over the phone or in person, the "sender's" tone of voice and body language could have suggested that he or she was very busy.

Some other detrimental consequences of these misperceptions can include a lowered sense of community among co-workers, misinterpreted feedback about performance, and general confusion. Email may also result in miscommunication because of the lag in response time between communications. In some cases, a long wait for an email response can be interpreted negatively. Furthermore, if there is a misunderstanding, it cannot be corrected as quickly as face-to-face or phone communication.

As email is a relatively new form of communication, there is no widely accepted standard for communicating emotions. Emoticons – symbols that are used to express emotion in electronic communication – are not

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always interpreted the same way by everyone. This is especially true across cultures. For example, East Asian cultures use emoticons that are drastically different from those typically used in the U.S. In addition, many email etiquette experts recommend against using emoticons in business communications because they can appear unprofessional.

Practical Advice for Effective Communication

There are several practical strategies that can be used to increase the effectiveness of email communication:

- Be aware, and make employees aware of the problems often encountered with conveying emotion through email. This will help employees with both sending and receiving emails.
- Respond to emails quickly and increase the amount of detailed feedback provided.

- Offer email training to all employees to establish organizational norms about email communication.
- Use alternative methods of communication – such as speaking in person, or over the phone – when dealing with sensitive topics or performance feedback.

Perhaps with time social norms for communicating emotion through email will be established. For now, however, organizations should encourage the use of these guidelines to improve their email communication skills and prevent against the negative aspects of email use.

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