

'Like building a new motorway': establishing the rules for ethical email use at a UK Higher Education Institution

Laura J. Spence

Introduction

The development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the resulting expansion of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as a key business medium have not escaped the attention of the business ethics community. As Rosenberg (1999) notes, "Advocates of the increasing use of computer technology, in the workplace and elsewhere, should be reminded that the humane treatment of people is a growing casualty of this process". The last decade has seen a flurry of publications which attempt to delineate the ethical issues important in the use of ICTs, and to build some basic guidelines which ensure that social responsibility is taken into account in the rush to exploit the 'Information Superhighway' and the associated communications technologies (Maner 1996, Watson and Pitt 1993, Brown 1996). New technologies are impacting on the workplace faster than norms, rules and ethical expectations for their use can be established. There is a clear need for further serious efforts to raise ethical consciousness and ethical behaviour in the 'networked economy' (Zonghao 2001). As with other developments of codes of conduct, it is inappropriate to assume that generically derived guidelines on the use of ICTs can be universally applied to individual organisations.

In this article findings of a study to establish ethical email use guidelines within one Higher Edu-

cation Institution are presented. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are an important organisational type as far as computer-mediated communication (CMC) is concerned. CMC is any interpersonal communication which uses computer technology in the transmission or storage of information (Edwards and Clear 2001: 81). HEIs were not only critical in the development of the networks necessary for email as a common means of communication, they are also characterised by widespread utilisation of email systems and the type of intellectual property which can become 'hot' property when transferred electronically. Conscious of this and the potential ramifications of widespread email use on Higher Education Institution staff, research was commissioned by one such institution in the UK to investigate the use of email within the organisation and ethical issues relating to it.

The ethics of email use

One of the key questions confronting business ethicists is whether CMC is a 'special case' in terms of ethical considerations. Those of this view who argue that there is a fundamental difference cite issues such as the changed relationship between humans, the fragility and ownership of electronic data, use and abuse of workplace facilities, and monitoring and privacy. While none

of these factors is in itself unique, the combination of new perspectives and the rapidity with which new technologies are becoming the norm in the workplace establish a heightening of the ethical significance of certain issues. Here the focus is particularly on electronic mail and Internet technology use.

(i) The changing nature of human relationships

The changing nature of relationships which ICTs enable is cited as a key characteristic of the introduction of new technologies (Parker, Swope and Baker 1990). Rogerson (1999) talks about the lack of 'social glue' in a highly computerised world, where there is no natural space for casual conversation. For example, the ex-chief executive of UK-nationwide retail chain Matalan, Angus Monro, allegedly "banned internal emails, regarding them as insidious (saying that) people have got to talk to each other" (Finch 2001). However, the extent to which emails are really different from previous technologies such as communication by fax machine or disembodied telephone is unclear. Flanagan (1999) suggests that there is a difference, that we say things in email that we may never say in hard copy or verbally, and that different rules of grammar, punctuation, and even honest representation and use of crude language seem to apply.

In a UK context personal relationships are an important bond in managing business and organisations. These, one might argue, can be achieved even where communications technologies create an increased personal distance between those communicating. Just as a 'business' telephone call may begin with some social conversation, an email too can combine the social and strictly functional business for which it is composed. Rogerson (1999) notes that electronic communication may even support 'social glue' by enabling naturally shy people to take part in communication fully without the psychological pressure of face to face contact.

The removal of the immediate proximity of sender and receiver of messages may have equal opportunity implications. While telephone communication helps prevent prejudicial judgements such as those based on skin colour, age or dress,

dialect and manner of speaking may still act as signals of diversity. The typewritten script of an email, although not guaranteeing grammatical accuracy, offers everyone the opportunity of an equally professional status. Interestingly, some people interpret this as 'coldness' and use symbols to convey emotions such as happiness (☺), thereby personalising their message.

Disembodied communication also allows the leaving of messages for respondents to pick up as and when it is convenient for the respondent, and thus potentially avoids the need for individuals to waste time chasing up absent colleagues. Telephone answer machines can operate on the same principle, but an email can cope with a rather more complex message. This sophistication does not prevent individuals ignoring their messages, but that is a human rather than an electronic frailty. CMCs commonly allow for asynchronous 'discussion', where there is a time gap between normally text-based messages being sent and responses received (Edwards and Clear 2001: 82).

Finally, a key point here relates to the combination of communication media. Where a sensitive point is being made and the response of the receiver cannot be predicted, the messenger may choose face-to-face or telephone communication in order that the response can be read as the message is delivered, and delivery adjusted simultaneously. In fact, just as with other communications methods, there is still a need for 'interpersonal skills' in choosing the medium and the mode of delivery. Email communication can be seen as a liberating social force, offering an additional means of communication, and empowering those who are less comfortable with other methods. While it might be a mistake to consider it as a replacement for other means of communication, it can certainly act as a complement and, used sensibly, enables communication rather than constraining it.

(ii) Fragility and ownership of electronic data

The apparent fragility of electronic data, for example the fact that important data tables can be altered with almost no trace, places additional responsibility on the conveyors of electronic information. Issues of responsibility for accuracy

and the protection of information become paramount. This, it could be argued, is one of the distinctive features of electronic communication, since systems of protection for intellectual works (such as patenting and copyright) were designed for tangible products (Watson and Pitt 1993). At the moment there is neither clear protection for electronic data, nor understanding of the limits of ownership and responsibility for accuracy. Such issues are compounded by the potential for mass dissemination via the Internet and by means of electronic mail. Given that even accidental inaccuracy by experienced keyboard operators occurs at a rate of one inaccurate keystroke per 100 (Rogerson 1999), the potential for incorrect information dissemination is great. Similarly the ownership of electronic data, accurate or otherwise, is unclear and could have critical implications for the user and subject of information.

Flanagan (1999) notes that even if we accept that employers own the data that is sent on their systems (that is, email content sent by employees), interpretation of the data may be incorrectly handled by employers, particularly since emails are commonly written in shorthand and abbreviated form.

In an academic context, the lack of peer review or editorial control of published work on the World Wide Web (De George 1999) might suggest a weakening in integrity and quality; alternatively it may give improved access to debates for non-conventional but relevant contributors. One of the ongoing characteristics of ICT thus seems to be its potential use for both good and ill.

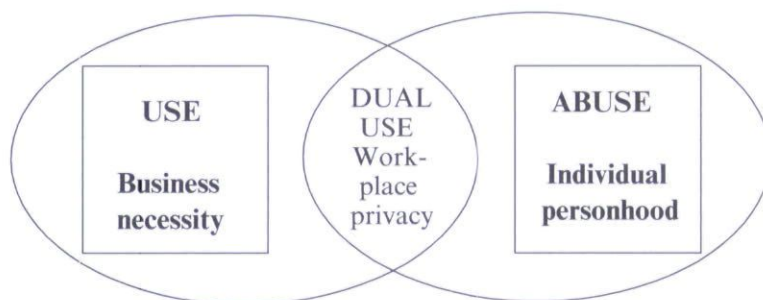
(iii) Use, dual-use, and abuse

The increasing prevalence of ICTs in the workplace has focused the minds of employers on the use of organisational equipment for non-organisational tasks. This is not of course a new phenomenon. The blurred lines between work and personal life are to be found in the use of work stationery for personal tasks, the use of private telephones for 'work' calls, the use of work telephones for 'private' calls, the reading of newspapers in work time, unpaid overtime, and so on. There are no clear lines to be drawn in any of these cases, particularly for academics with independence and professional status. The introduction of widely available ICTs has again broadened the spectrum of possibilities by offering a powerful tool of information access and distribution to many employees.

A distinction can be made here between use, dual-use and abuse of ICTs in the workplace. Brown (1996) distinguishes between the realms of business necessity and individual personhood and suggests that their intersection covers the domain of workplace privacy. In Figure 1, a link has been made between Brown's notions of 'business necessity', 'workplace privacy' and 'individual personhood' and the employment of ICTs for 'business use', 'dual-use' and 'abuse'.

The associations in Figure 1 are not absolute but they may provide a useful framework for considering the issues of use of workplace CMCs such as email and Internet access. The use of the ICT resources available for business necessity is the easiest to identify. Where email or the Internet

Figure 1: Locating the use and abuse of ICTs in the workplace



(Developed from Brown 1996).

are employed for purposes directly related to the functional role of the individual in the organisation, there is no immediate problem. An example in the Higher Education context might be an email discussion of an admissions query between admissions tutor and the admissions registrar. This would be a legitimate and responsible use of electronic resources.

Where email or the Internet are used for purposes which have nothing whatsoever to do with the organisational business or the well-being of the individual at work, it might be said that there has been an abuse of the access to ICT facilities. Hodson et al. (1999) define 'abuse' of a firm's resources in this sphere as the use of email by the employee to further personal rather than organisational objectives. This might include, but is not restricted to, illegal activities such as hacking into national security databases. Examples might be the circulation of offensive materials, the setting up of a private business or the accessing of indecent websites. While there may be a few instances where such activity is reasonable, for example where it relates directly to scholarly research, on the whole such actions amount to abuse of the organisation's resources.

The most difficult issue is the intersection between use and abuse, the area where personal use may have some positive workplace implications, and work use may have some personal implications. Internet surfing for hobby interests will hone the IT skills of employees who use those same skills for work tasks. Non-work friends may enable problem-solving that would otherwise cost time and resources in house (Hodson et al. 1999), whether they be through the resolving of IT queries or personal counselling. The ability of employees to resolve individual issues such as the renewal of car insurance allows them to concentrate on work tasks. Furthermore it is natural, even desirable, that employees become friendly with colleagues, and the combining of social and work discussions within emails is a clear example of 'dual-use'. No-one leaves their personal lives at home entirely, and employers should not expect them so to do: employers might keep in mind that employees will often take work home with them, either literally or mentally. Accepting employees

as whole human beings, with all the benefits and costs this may bring, is likely to be beneficial for all in the longer term.

No differentiation has been made in the discussion so far between use of workplace ICTs and use of work time. Again, this is a difficult distinction. On the one hand utilisation of organisational software and hardware may not in itself be considered problematic by employers. The equipment has been purchased for work reasons, and once installed the incremental cost of its use is likely to be negligible. However, the work time which employees use in the pursuit of personal goals may well be an issue. Surfing the Internet proves to be a surprisingly time-consuming activity, and responding to personal emails may well distract individuals from their work tasks. The relevance of time lost must to some extent depend on the type of work done. Where individuals are doing tasks strictly limited to particular hours, or even paid by the hour, time lost during the working day will be of significance. On the other hand, for professionals who are measured by their output rather than their presence, time lost might be considered as merely a reallocation of time-use.

Hodson et al. (1999) note that the management of household matters in work time is inevitable in a social environment in which workdays are longer, and household management responsibilities are shared between multiple earners with careers. Important here is the fact that the technology is readily available to monitor Internet and email use of networked employees.

(iv) Monitoring and privacy

Attitudes to personal privacy are culturally embedded (Flanagan 1999, De George 1999, Tavani 2000). Flanagan suggests that privacy is necessary for autonomy, while Tavani proposes that in practice privacy can be viewed as "either a presumed or stipulated interest that individuals have with respect to protecting personal information, personal property, or personal space" (Tavani 2000: 65). In the context of ICT development, electronic monitoring of employees – in and outside of the workplace – is the likely mechanism by which privacy may be infringed. Potential intrusion of

privacy in terms of accessing and monitoring electronic mail is technically simple. Hodson et al. (1999) argue that employee monitoring is unethical according to Kant's categorical imperative and according to Aristotle's virtue ethics and the search for practical wisdom. In most countries there is no legal reason why employers should not monitor employees' emails, yet it has been argued that it is unlikely to be in the employer's self-interest to exercise that right (Hodson et al. 1999). Reasons for this include the negative effect which monitoring may have on employee morale and good trust relations within the organisation, the inhibition of natural communication between employees which may be advantageous to the organisation, and the institutionalisation of hierarchical power imbalances which are contrary to contemporary empowerment policies. Being an employer does not mean having the right to monitor private email conversations, but employers may wish to know whether their employees are abusing the system (Miller and Weckert 2000).

Rosenberg (1999) reports on the 1996 Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility 'Electronic Privacy Principles' which suggest that:

'Each employer should provide and act on clear policies regarding the privacy implications of the computing resources used in the workplace. The policies should explicitly describe:

- acceptable use of electronic mail and computer resources, including personal use;
- practices that may be used to enforce these policies, such as the interception and reading of electronic mail or scanning of hard disks;
- penalties for non-compliance with these policies.'

Many writers argue that employees should at least be informed of any electronic monitoring systems that might be used on workplace computers (Hodson et al. 1999, Rosenberg 1999, Moore 2000). These principles suggest a basic need for transparency of any monitoring policy.

Research methodology

The research reported here, on the perceptions of ethical email use at a UK Higher Education

Institution, was completed in 2000. This internal project was undertaken in response to concern that there was insufficient consensus on how emails should be used within the organisation. Emails were being seen by many as the communications mechanism of choice, yet conventions, etiquette and ethics for the medium were lacking. The research was seen as part of the process of raising awareness and as a step towards rectifying this situation.

Focus group research was identified as a useful method of investigation for understanding email use in the Higher Education Institution because it allows for cross-institutional comment and discussion. In order to gain a cross-section of views from the Institution, four broad types of Institution member were identified. These groups were: professional/academic related (6), administrators/support staff (6), academics (3) and students (4), with the respective number of participants shown in brackets. An appropriate mix of gender, organisational seniority, ethnicity, and longevity in the organisation was sought. One focus group was arranged for each of these groups, with an emphasis on representation within each group from across the faculties and departments.

Each focus group took between 1 hour and 2 hours. The question schedule was based on a brief literature review and prior discussions with relevant internal parties. The key questions were on the impact of email, on current use of email and on perceptions of ethical use. It should be noted that the evidence presented here is not intended to provide any statistically significant information, but rather to offer an in-depth insight into email use by a cross-section of the organisation. Some draft email user guidelines were prepared prior to the focus groups and presented to the participants as a stimulus for discussion.

Findings and discussion

The data provided insight into the ways in which the widespread availability of email at the Institution has influenced the working lives of staff and students, and into the way they are currently using the medium as a means of communication. This

evidence confirmed suspicions that working life was significantly affected by the advent of email for all the office-based staff. Here results relating to the influence of email in working patterns, what it is used for and opinions about inappropriate use are presented.

(i) Influence of email

The existence of email was generally applauded by almost all of the participants as a positive addition to their working life, improving speed and ease of communication. The one or two respondents who did not like email readily agreed that it had its advantages and was now a permanent part of the communications landscape.

The focus group discussions were mainly on what were perceived to be the negative influences of the advent of email, such as the increased workload which was enabled by electronic communications.

Email is like a building a new motorway – it should ease traffic but it doesn't it just creates more. (Professional/Academic related 6)

The ease of communication has led to uncontrolled increases in exchanges which require action on the part of the recipient. However, there is no clear guidance on how to manage the messages arriving by this new medium and the resulting workload. To stretch the analogy, it is as if everyone is required to use a new motorway for which there is no common highway code, laws or even rules and expectations of use.

The way in which email communication affects 'social glue' is subject to different interpretations in the research. It seems email is a form of social bonding for some and social disintegration for others; this seems largely to be influenced by personality types and technological skills and preferences.

I am worried about the social consequences of more and more email use and losing personal contact. (Professional/Academic related 3)

I disagree; I think that email helps you to keep in touch (Professional/Academic related 6, Professional/Academic related 3 agrees).

Email has changed the working lives of staff and has, in some cases at least, added pressure as well as allowing efficiency improvements. Some of the efficiency aspects of email become clearer when the forms of email use are considered in the following section.

(ii) Use of email

The results from the focus groups show a wide variety of email use. The main forms of use are: as an internal memo (staff-staff), internal memo (staff-student), as formal external communication, as informal (work-related) communication, as social communication.

(a) Internal memo (staff-staff)

All of the staff groups mentioned the use of email as a replacement of the paper memo, and the ease of sending the same memo to multiple recipients was stressed. A particularly interesting aspect of email communication is that it reaches further than the internal paper memo because some staff, particularly academics, have arranged access to email from outside the Institution. One administrator acknowledged this characteristic of email:

Email is really useful for emailing staff when they are working from home. They can choose when to open up email. Telephoning staff working at home feels much more intrusive. (Administrator 2)

Not everyone has become familiar with email in this Higher Education Institution. In an enlightening exchange, two staff members said:

I would not use email to write to senior staff, I would send a memo (Professional/Academic related 6)

Yes but that is only because some senior staff refuse to use email. (Professional/Academic related 5)

The non-use of email by senior staff members was also mentioned by some academics. The reason for this was felt by the respondents to be fear of the new medium and ignorance of how to use it. It is intriguing that despite a general support of email as a useful means of communication, its widespread utilisation is in part being hindered by a few individuals in higher positions in the hierarchy. If the advantages of email use are to be

maximised then this hindrance needs to be addressed. On the other hand, freedom of choice in communications media would suggest that individuals should not be forced to use a medium in which they are not comfortable. This is an interesting conundrum, but in practice an expectation close to a requirement of email use is emerging in this HEI.

(b) Internal memo (staff-student)

The use of email between staff and student seemed to vary between departments. Some found email a useful way of communicating between staff and students, for example:

Email groups help a lot and are used to contact students in the first instance e.g. module choices, we would email them saying they have insufficient credits or whatever. We would put a reminder on formal headed paper. They have a good response rate from students but usually the student is the initiator so they're expecting a response. (Administrator 5)

Academic 3, on the other hand, suggested that although messages were often sent collectively to students they only seemed to get through to about 40%. The academic had no real evidence for this and we would need to compare it to other mechanisms such as letters, announcements and physical notice boards.

From the students' point of view, although a postgraduate student noted email as being an unobtrusive way of reaching staff, an undergraduate student painted a clear picture of how things can be:

Sometimes lecturing staff use email but this assumes that everyone can log on to receive the email. It doesn't take into account those students who don't have to come to the Institution everyday. Email is not the solution – nor is putting paper in pigeonholes – neither works well on its own. ... I wouldn't bother going over to the Computer Centre to write an email to a tutor when you are in the same building anyway and you can go and talk to them. It is better to see them face-to-face, it is much more ... effective. If you have been sick or something it is much better to explain it than just write the word 'sick'. It will be more effective. (Student 4)

It seems that there is no real precedent for staff-student communications by email in this Insti-

tution: restricted student access to email must account for this in part. It should be remembered by staff that students are not likely to have remote access or even easy on-site access to their email accounts. This is a factor which may well differ between institutions with better or worse resources and student profiles. Warwick University in the UK announced in 2001 that students would be required to have their own computers. This is certainly one alternative to combating restricted computer access.

The situation for postgraduate students, however, seems to be different, and email may be an effective way of enabling regular and easy communication between supervisor and student. Students are not always keen to use email to communicate. Other research at universities in the US has found, in contrast, that (business) students preferred email communication to written or oral communication (Merrier and Ruthann 1997).

(c) External letter (formal and informal communication)

In some instances email was used instead of a formal letter to communicate externally, for example in setting up a conference, dealing with suppliers, or contacting potential employers (by students). Overall, however, the use of email to substitute for an external formal communication seemed a less popular option than other uses. Issues which concerned the respondents related to presentation and grammar, on which there was some disagreement, as shown in this exchange:

You don't have to worry about spelling or grammar. (Administrator 2)

I do worry about spelling and grammar if it's business – but I'm not so worried if it is a personal email. (Administrator 6)

External communication of a less strictly formal kind was more common among the academics. When discussing the formality of email, one of the academics also commented:

You have sometimes to interpret the intentions of the sender of an email. Because it always comes in the same format there are not always the clues there that you would get for example from a saucy postcard! The layout of a formal letter, a letterhead, the signature, all give you clues about formality. (Academic 2)

This point is important when considering email use guidelines for the organisation. While email can be informal, when it is carrying a basically formal message we should help the recipient interpret this by adding some more formal signs. Language and layout may assist with this, but perhaps use of the Higher Education Institution emblem on formal communications, and using scanned-in signatures would be sensible procedures.

(d) Social use

Institutional email accounts are regularly being used for non-work related, personal communications by the account holders. Reasons cited for this were the cost or time delay of communicating in any other way with overseas friends and family and the speed of an email compared to a letter. The 'dual-use' point about the difficulty of separating work and pleasure was also made:

Personal bits can slip into business emails so you couldn't really exclude personal use. (Professional/Academic related 1)

Some informal control is already going on in some departments on the (ab)use of email use for personal reasons as indicated here:

In our department there are unwritten rules about using lunchtimes etc. to answer personal emails. (Administrator 1)

While email is usually felt to be useful for social messages, replacing the quick phone call, it is not necessarily a preferred medium for all. One respondent noted the lack of 'personality' in email. The student cited below makes an impassioned case for oral rather than email communication:

I would not use it for personal things; it is so ... 'emotionless'. Whatever you want to say it is always in 'Times New Roman'. I would prefer to write a letter or phone home. It is more expensive but I would rather hear the other person's voice and respond to it. And anyway by the time you have queued up for a computer you might as well have got out a piece of paper and written a letter. (Student 4)

It seems that it is generally accepted that email will be used for personal messages, although no-one was clear what the limit should be to this. There seems little point in trying to prevent personal

email use particularly since many staff have external relationships which are both personal and professional. In summary, email is used within the Higher Education Institution as both formal and informal means of communication externally and internally. Its flexibility in this sense is both a benefit and a cause of the uncertainty as to the appropriate parameters of its use.

(iii) Opinions about inappropriate use of email

The respondents had strong views about the unethical and inefficient misuse of email. These fell into categories relating to: confidential information, informal content, unnecessary group communications and 'flaming'. Responses were given in answer to the question 'is there anything which email should not be used for?'

(a) Confidential information

The sending of confidential information by email was considered inappropriate by many of the respondents. This was related to their concern that email was not a secure medium in the way that they perceived a paper copy in a sealed envelope to be. For example, staff noted that they would not discuss a student's mitigating circumstances over email, and financial requests were felt to require a hand-written signature. Confidentiality and authenticity of documents were the main concern, as this quotation shows:

I worry about reference requests for students coming in by email and requesting a reply by email. I'm concerned about confidentiality. I tend to write a letter and would then post it and send it by email. I am worried that the student will get hold of it and alter it. (Academic 2)

Some of the respondents considered the physical environment of the recipient rather than the integrity of electronic exchange as a key issue; suggesting for example that the privacy of the individual's workstation was the critical factor in whether to send confidential material by email. A few of the respondents had experience of the ease with which some can 'hack' into the Institution network, while others assumed that some people

would have ready access to their accounts. Many voiced uncertainty about who had access to view the email content of others, for example, this student incorrectly assumes:

I suppose your supervisor can look at your email content if they want to. (Student 3)

Some of the administrators were worried that their account was too secure, and that emails which their colleagues could have responded to were left unanswered if for any reason the individual's account was not opened. This situation is clearly more relevant to those who have emails sent to them because of their role (which others share – e.g. payroll administrator) rather than to them as an individual. In some cases shared email accounts addressed to departments rather than an individual are used.

The most consistent feature relating to the issue of confidentiality of email is the ignorance of staff and students as to how secure the system is. The lack of awareness of whether emails are monitored is also important, given the calls for transparency of monitoring procedures in the literature.

(b) Informal content

Most of the respondents had received objectionable emails containing unsolicited non-work related content. Junk mail sending, such as chain letters, jokes and 'students selling a Ford Fiesta' (Student 1) was identified as being an inappropriate, unethical use of an Institutional email account. There was, however, an indication that junk mail sending may be something which becomes the norm within a particular email group or department, since one student said that they had never received any, while others claimed to be inundated with unsolicited general circulars.

Among the employees, attachments which may be work-related or otherwise were cited as a potential problem. One academic cited the actions of a new employee who couldn't invite all his departmental colleagues to his wedding, so kindly distributed electronic versions of some of the photos to the whole department and ground the local network to a halt as a result. As the respondent stated:

Errors happen with new staff when they don't know the etiquette because people are unsure of how to use

it. This will happen more and more as new people come into the technology, but that's not really abuse. (Academic 1)

The implications for the Higher Education Institution's resources in terms of time lost due to network problems, and individual time wasted in deleting junk mail, could be significant. This is something which could quite easily be guided by a code of conduct. The sending of highly offensive material such as pornography or rude jokes was not discussed by participants. The indications were that these types of email were not widely received, although the respondents may have felt unable to mention them in the focus group setting.

(c) Unnecessary group communications

A consequence of the ease of circulating or forwarding email messages to a high number of participants – a potential efficiency saving mechanism – was the inappropriate zeal with which this facility was used by some. As a respondent said:

Forwarding is like committing to paper. If you email you don't usually think of how far it might go. If you don't want it to go far don't say it! Emails can't be taken back (Administrator 4)

The feeling was that just because you can copy emails to large groups easily does not mean that you should. One of the unanswered questions is at what point over-zealous copying of messages to individuals actually constitutes the sending of junk mail. Anecdotal evidence has been received of an individual who automatically deletes all messages sent to him if they are 'copied'. There were also stories of individuals who were quite aggrieved by the copying of their line manager when complaints were being made. There are problems here of carelessness and even malice.

(d) 'Flaming'

One of the consequences of the speedy reply that email can elicit is the phenomenon known as 'flaming'. Flaming is the angry response witnessed in email content which might not have been written if a slower or more expressive form of communication had been used instead. Many of the respondents had witnessed flaming. In the

example below, the respondent thoughtfully identifies how this can happen with email:

Once or twice I have seen flaming email because it's so immediate to respond to an email, just by clicking on 'reply'. That isn't common to other forms of communication. If you're chatting they would realize that you had misunderstood and correct it and in a letter you would take more care in what you're saying – whereas in an email you don't worry about grammar, syntax – they are often garbled and it is so easy to misunderstand the intent or content. (Academic 1)

It seems that increased care needs to be encouraged to ensure that Institutional members are not falling into the trap of responding in an uncivil manner to emails. The level of civility required in email is no different from that which is expected in face-to-face exchanges.

Conclusion and recommendations

Just as the use of a new motorway requires new rules, new skills and new forms of behaviour, so too does email use in an organisation. In a Higher Education Institution context many of the issues in relation to ethics and CMCs are the same as in other organisations. An HEI combines administrative tasks with the enabling of teaching and research. Add to this the community of students who are in-house rather than merely external customers, and the complexity of the Higher Education Institution constituency starts to become clear.

It seems likely that appropriate ICTs, sensibly used, can help to lubricate the communication mechanisms both internally and externally. The installers of Information Systems and training have important roles to play in the basic utilisation of CMCs in the Higher Education Institution, because technological solutions can go some way to improving the use of email in terms of both efficiency and ethics. Information Systems managers should consider putting some features as standard default. Useful options might be: setting the default reply to 'return to sender only' rather than 'return to group', asking email recipients if they want to receive large attachments, investing

in ensuring security of the email systems, and creating automatic barriers to potentially offensive material. Some costs may be involved in these facilities, but there would be cost savings in terms of repairing damage when over-loaded systems crash and the time of email recipients would be saved. It is possible that professional individuals will object to such measures, and claim that if individuals want to install barriers themselves then they can. However, current levels of technical expertise suggest that ability to do such things individually varies. Since the organisation has responsibility for the email software, they should take actions to ensure that minimum standards are set across the board, not just by those who have the technical ability to do so themselves.

In the researched Institution email was very widely used, and was felt to be a useful communications medium. As such, it should be acknowledged as one of the forms of official communication within the institution. One of the implications of this is that staff members with ready computer access must be prepared to accept being communicated with internally by mail, and not inconvenience others by refusing to use email to communicate when it is the most sensible choice. As a minimum, all office-based staff should be capable of managing their own email account, which means that staff training must be comprehensive.

Training in email use is as essential an element of 'safe use' as learning to drive a car. While most people seem to find it easy to teach themselves the basics, the findings of the research presented here show that it is not sufficient to be able to use email; individuals need to be able to use it well. This has three elements. First, individuals should be able to manage their email. This entails coping with the 'traffic' in terms of prioritising incoming mail, deciding what to keep, filing email, using the address book, using a 'receipt' facility for important emails, not replying to groups automatically, and so on.

Second, security awareness and individual responsibility needs to be taught, for example, ensuring the choice of a safe password, and keeping it absolutely private (some individuals in this sample thought they were being efficient by giving colleagues their password so that their account

could always be accessed), not using email for highly confidential exchanges, and the use of encryption. Employee and student records should be carefully maintained and a clear policy regarding access rights established and publicised. Since a Higher Education Institution is particularly concerned with intellectual capital, special consideration may be given to the issues of plagiarism by both students and academic staff. The publication of material on Higher Education Institution websites, and the responsibility for accuracy should also be a key concern.

Third, training should cover what can be called 'email etiquette'. This might include assurance that text can best be kept simple, that attachments should not be used in all situations (for sending large attachments, seek prior permission), understanding plagiarism possibilities and the fact that email text is as personal as the written word or telephone conversation and hence should not be passed on without permission, not sending jokes or junk mail, and avoiding flaming. Using email style to indicate different content types should also be encouraged. For example, electronic mail can be used for formal communications, since it has the same legal status as a letter, and users should indicate the formality in the way the letter is written. The organisation could even set up a template for formal emails, with the institution logo and a house style.

Students similarly need training in these areas, and this could readily be covered in induction and IT introductory courses. However, an additional issue is the limited computer resources in institutions such as the one researched. Until students have wider access to networked computers, departments should not consider email communication as the main student-staff medium, but as a supplement to other media. Further investment and more computers is desirable, but other options may help such as having dedicated 'check your email' terminals around the campus. Encouraging students to have their own computers and networking all campus rooms are also possibilities, although the potential for excluding poorer students should be taken very seriously and addressed.

Abuse of the ICTs available to members of universities is bound to be of concern to senior

management. It should be made clear to Institutional members that they should not assume anonymity because they see no face at the end of an email or feel unattached to websites accessed. One of the difficulties is deciding where to draw the line in terms of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' private use. Users might reasonably argue that if it is acceptable for one employee to check how their football team are doing on the Internet, why is it not acceptable to visit a porn site, or a National Front site? While the latter are abhorrent, Higher Education Institution leaders are not the thought police. A prudent move might be to encourage individuals who can to have a private email account and Internet access separate from their work account, helping them to see that the two are not always appropriately bundled together.

Employers and IS managers should also not abuse the technology available to them by intruding on their colleagues' activities. The professional environment and the high degree of autonomy in universities compared to other organisations suggests that an emphasis on individual responsibility and the development of programmes which support and encourage virtuous individuals would be the way forward here. Trust in individual choices, and acceptance of mistakes, is an essential part of this, and is inconsistent with a widespread electronic monitoring policy. However, where law-breaking or fraud are suspected this may be done, and institutional members should be well aware of this.

Guidelines and codes can be published to help steer and encourage ethical use of email. These could most usefully have a detailed, extended version, and a handy reminder card which can be placed by the computer, or even be printed up into a mouse-mat. Such guidelines should be clear and consistent, and help the user remember the good advice of their email training. They should be revised regularly, as the issues around email use develop and change. However, if everyone is following the same 'highway code', the chances are that good practice will become part of the wider culture of the institution.

Having implemented some of the recommendations discussed here, the researched institution is taking a wider look at communication and ethics

in the broader context. While some of the conclusions in this article may be of use to other HEIs and organisations, organisational and indeed national culture are bound to play a part in creating a framework for acceptable CMC use. Further research is needed to understand these cultural influences, particularly given the improved possibility of international communication which CMCs facilitate.

Technology can mistakenly be given the blame for wrong-doing when it is in fact just the conduit through which acts are carried out, with the potential for exacerbating unethical behaviour because of the speed, synchronicity, reach and anonymity which it facilitates (Herschel and Hayes Andrews 1997). That same technology could allow increased scrutinising of employer activities as a form of regulation, but in the end the answer to the abuse of technology is not more technology, it is more responsible use of the technology we have.

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