

## THE EMAIL COMMUNICATION GAP

A recent survey found that almost half the Australian workforce now uses email as their primary form of business communications. It is not surprising, then, that a range of associated problems have begun to emerge in the workplace.

The development of email technology has allowed inter-business communication to occur at unprecedented speeds. Information can be circulated in seconds and decisions can be made on the spot, anywhere, anytime. While the term 'snail mail' underestimates the continuing importance of the postal service to our lives today, it nevertheless reflects the impatience we have simultaneously developed with anything that now takes longer than a few hours to arrive. When we send an email, we expect it to be received immediately and we anticipate a prompt response.

Many of us now spend hours of our working day reading and responding to the barrage of emails that enter our inbox. The fear of receiving too late some vital piece of information or a message from the boss who sits in the room next door forces us to keep Outlook open continuously. It is the first thing we open when we get to work and the last thing we close down when we leave, if we close it at all. We are constantly checking for new messages. Every finger click on the 'send/receive' icon is accompanied by the anticipation of urgency and importance.

When we do receive a message that demands our personal attention, we are compelled to respond to it immediately. There's nothing worse than having to wait for a response to an email sent out more than an hour ago. If we are the ones waiting, we send a follow-up email. We get on the phone to check if the original email was received. Our demand for immediate communication has made us agitated and impatient.

There are now numerous training companies that offer workshops in how to use Outlook effectively. Trainees are encouraged to develop their computer skills so as to become more proficient in the use of the email program. Some of these workshops touch on the issue of email management. They aim to help trainees take back some control of their emailing practices. Switching off the automatic download, for example, is a common suggestion. But this simple directive underestimates the overwhelming power of email addiction. It also places any compliant trainee in an awkward position when, once back in their own workplace, they have to explain to agitated and impatient callers why they haven't yet responded to an email sent only an hour ago.

The biggest and least recognised problem with email, however, relates to etiquette. Many businesses have introduced strict policies to let their staff know what can and cannot be sent via email. Many have guidelines about the private use of email during work hours or prohibitions on sending sexually explicit material. But very few businesses consider it important to train their staff in how to write emails that are clear and concise, will reduce the risk of communication conflict, and can help create a more professional face for the business.

Email rage is a common occurrence. Without access to the usual signifiers of body language and voice that accompany other forms of communication, email messages can often come across as detached, even rude. The fact that emails are often written and sent quickly also raises the risk of the message containing something that should not have been said or was said in an inappropriate way.

The perception of anonymity offered by the internet can work to create a sense of invincibility whereby people will often write in an email what they would not dare to say face-to-face to a person. Of course, the danger with emails is that, unlike in a telephone or face-to-face conversation, there is a log of what has been said. Employees who write and send emotionally charged emails, therefore, put themselves and the business at risk.

In a recent survey, Citrix Online discovered that 61 percent of the Australian workforce admits to having sent or received an email that was misunderstood. Forty-one percent recognise they have sent an email to the wrong person. Nearly two-thirds of workers agreed they hit the reply button without ever considering if email was, indeed, the most effective means of communicating what they wanted to say. Australians have been labelled as 'trigger-happy' when it comes to emailing.

The way men and women use email also differs greatly. In their essay, *The Email Gender Gap*, Niki Panteli and Monica Seeley argue that women tend to be more polite, pay more attention to grammar, and prefer to keep their emails conversational. Men, in contrast, are direct and instructive. They are more spontaneous and impulsive when it comes to emailing. And they are more likely to include a signature to show their status. Trying to encourage male employees (the larger part of the Australian workforce) to pay closer attention to the content of their emails is, therefore, a difficult task. In the Australian culture, men are expected to be a little bit rough around the edges. Being polite and being articulate are considered feminine and weak traits. Try getting the men in your workplace to take these important attributes on board.

With 86 percent of the Australian workforce believing that an over-reliance on email can lead to ineffective business communications, there is now an urgent need to consider the importance of training in email etiquette. It is no longer sufficient to assume that an ability to read and write—skills most of us were taught pre-email—naturally equips us to use email to help encourage, rather than discourage, communication.

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