email use in a blue collar organisation

Email use is increasing. More people than ever before have email and they are getting better at using it. Because email has made information easier to send, more people are sending more information.

In 2002, we conducted a study of email in a Wellington factory employing 300 people. 24 staff members completed a questionnaire about their use of email, their attitudes to it and their email practices. Interviews were conducted with 12 of these staff members. In addition over 120 emails from this workplace were studied.

how widely is email used in the factory?

Email plays a very important role in the work of the factory and everybody has access to it.

However, some people don't use it very much at all. People on the factory floor prefer face-to-face communication. In other areas of the organization there is a good deal of variation in the extent to which email is used.

what is the effect of email on other forms of communication?

The growth in the use of email has led to a decline in the use of some other forms of communication, especially intra-office memos and faxes.

Most people, however, spend a lot of their working day in face-to-face communication and don't feel they are talking to each other less.

Face-to-face talk remains the preferred means of communication.

what do people use email for?

- Email is excellent for sending and seeking information and for doing day to day administrative tasks such as scheduling meetings, giving feedback and instructions and making requests;

- Many email messages are quite complex, and one message may perform several different functions

- Email was not considered appropriate for dealing with matters of a highly sensitive or personal nature, or for matters that involved any kind of conflict.

do people like email?

Most people feel email has improved the efficiency of communication in the factory.

67% said "yes"!

People like email because:

- It is fast and efficient. It lets them send messages to a lot of people at the same time, and to people who are otherwise difficult to get hold of or to access.
- It leaves a paper trail.

what annoys people?

About half of the respondents identified features they found annoying in emails

- Unwanted or irrelevant emails including jokes which take a long time to open and which they haven't got time to read

- No response or feedback to an email. (In general people like to have their email responded to or acknowledged within one to two days)

- People replying or reacting too quickly and without thought

- Using email to show someone up

- Not reading an email carefully

- Bad spelling and grammar especially if it interferes with the clarity of the message

- "Waffling on"

- Being asked to forward on messages to a lot of people

- Respondents assuming you will read an email immediately

- Setting procedures through email without prior consultation

- Using email as a cover behind which to moan and whinge and gripe

important things to remember

According to our findings in this workplace it is worth remembering that:

- Email is a public document that can be easily forwarded on.

- The most effective email, both in terms of fostering good working relationships, and fulfilling its workplace function, is one that

  - has a clear and informative subject line
  - is brief and to the point and has a pleasant and friendly tone.

about the project

The Language in the Workplace Project aims to identify the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication in business contexts. To date the project has recorded and analysed over 2000 interactions in 16 government and private sector organisations. Some features of workplace talk we are currently investigating include:

Directives	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
Miscommunication	How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings?
Style shifting	How do people adapt their talk to their audience?
Email	What role does email play in workplace communication?
Problem solving	How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks?
Meetings	What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings?
Humour and small talk	How does "social talk" work as a communication tool?
Workplace culture	How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication?
Knowledge work	How is knowledge created and advanced through talk?

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We would like to express our thanks to those who allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
http://www/vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/

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LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE