

using email at work

Nearly everybody reports that their use of email 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 April 2001, twenty eight people in one Wellington workplace employing over 500 people completed a questionnaire which asked them about their attitudes to email and their email use and practices. Nine people were interviewed at length about these things. The nine included a number of senior staff and managers

In the workplace studied nearly half of those surveyed spent more than an hour a day on email. On average they sent seven emails a day and received 18. Not surprisingly the figure was higher for senior staff and managers. Email usage seems to be a little higher at the beginning and end of the week.

email and workplace communication

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

However, people are spending just as much time talking to each other and the most common form of communication is still face to face. Email has not reduced the need for meetings or the amount of time people spend at them.

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;
- Its big advantages are that it can reach many people at once, it doesn't depend on someone being in their office, it is fast and people can attend to it at their own convenience;
- It's also useful for forwarding on information but care must be exercised if doing so.

Forwarding on a message that the sender thought to be confidential is seen as a gross breach of trust.

when is email not appropriate?

Nearly everyone surveyed said that they would not use email for dealing with matters of a personal, sensitive or confidential nature. These things are best dealt with by phone or face to face.

An overseas study shows that people prefer to receive important information or good or bad news in person.

Email is also seen as not being very suitable for conveying very complex information or information that could be misinterpreted.

hidden messages

The words on the page are not the only message that an email sends:

- The absence or presence of a greeting or close or the type of greeting or close conveys a message;
- The way in which an email message is written can also give cues as to the emotional state of the writer. Capital letters, exclamation marks and red underlining can convey anger. Abbreviated sentences may give the receiver the feeling that the person on the other end is short-tempered and aggressive;
- In a professional context, misspellings may smack of a 'she'll be right' attitude especially if they're being sent outside the organisation;
- Research has shown that in computer-mediated communication, such as email, a gender cue is given on average once in every 3-4 lines of text.

important things to remember

- Be concise and to the point. Messages that are longer than half a page may be better sent as attachments as long emails are difficult to read;
- At work, people prefer the message to be work-related and relevant to the recipient;
- In general, people do not appreciate being sent an email by someone who could easily pass on that message in person;
- Because an email is a written record and old emails never die, a good general rule is not to say anything in an email that you would not like to see attributed to you in the front page headline of your daily newspaper.

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:

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

The Research Team

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University

Professor Janet Holmes, Project Director

Maria Stubbe, Research Fellow

Dr Bernadette Vine, Corpus Manager

Meredith Marra, Research Officer

Associated researchers and workplace practitioners
throughout New Zealand and the world

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/>

You can contact the project team at:

Language in the Workplace Project, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, WELLINGTON

Tel: (04) 463 5600 Fax: (04) 463 5604

Email: Janet.Holmes@vuw.ac.nz or Maria.Stubbe@vuw.ac.nz

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