

Some features of workplace emails

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Introduction

In the period since the nineties when email started to become a mode of communication in many workplaces, it has revolutionised workplace communication. As well as leading to an explosion in the amount of information being communicated, it has also led to changes in the way people communicate at work.

This paper reports on the findings of a study made of email use and practices in one large Wellington workplace in April and May 2001. In relation to this workplace setting, it discusses the growth of email use, the purposes for which email is used, and some socio-linguistic features of workplace emails. On the basis of these findings an attempt is then made to draw some conclusions about what constitutes an effective workplace email. The study forms a small part of the Language in The Workplace Project at Victoria University. Since 1996, researchers under the direction of Professor Janet Holmes have been studying workplace communication. Data has been collected from government departments, from companies like Mobil and Telecom, from factories and from small businesses.

The findings are drawn from the following data: a questionnaire completed by twenty-eight members of the staff (approximately six per cent), extensive follow-up interviews conducted with nine of the survey respondents, and a week's corpus of 275 emails collected from one senior staff member.

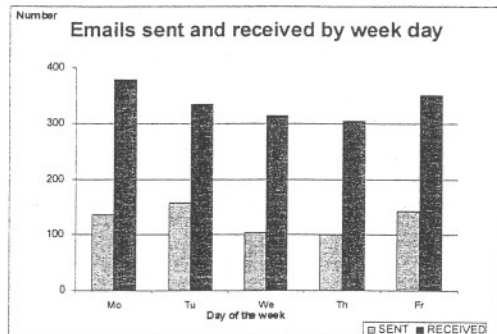
The growth... and growth of email

Surveys undertaken both overseas and in New Zealand show that there has been a phenomenal growth in the use of email in the last ten years. One international study conducted in April 2001¹ showed that it had grown 600 percent in six years and that New Zealand was right up with this trend.

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. The graph below shows the number of emails sent and received by a number of those surveyed over a one week period.

¹ Rogen International from research carried out in N. America, Europe and Asia/Pacific including New Zealand in March and April 2001.

A study carried out in the same workplace in 1999 (Waldvogel:1999) showed that only 50 percent of the staff spent more than 30 minutes daily on their email. Two years later the corresponding figure was nearly 90 percent.



The main reasons for the increase in usage mentioned by over half of the respondents are the increase in the number of people with access to email, their greater facility with it and recognition of its advantages, and the increased expectation that it will be used. The trend of increased usage is likely to continue. Management views email positively and as the organisation is being moved proactively into becoming ICT (information and computer technology) focussed, email is encouraged as one aspect of this.

The vast majority of emails sent and received were work-related. Non-work related and personal emails accounted for fewer than 12 percent of the total and this percentage was inflated somewhat by one individual's totals.

The effect of email use 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, most noticeably letters and memos. More than half of the respondents indicated that their use of these had decreased while nearly 50 percent reported a decrease in the use of the telephone fax and face-to face communication. In spite of this however, other forms of communication are still widely used.

Talking to people *face to face* is still the most commonly engaged in form of communication.

When asked about what communication activity they had engaged in most on their most recent day at work nearly half mentioned that their main communication activity was either attending meetings or having one-to-one conversations, while for another six it was talking on the telephone. Only eight people said that email and other written forms of communication dominated their communication activities

In this workplace, face to face communication, including meetings, appears to be the primary medium for maintaining social relationships. Face to face is still seen as the best medium for communicating about complex matters or for anything that has an element of conflict or that requires a human touch. One interviewee expressed it in this way:

If I want somebody to know more about what I'm saying than I can say in text, that is the body language, the steely eye, the attitude, the sort of care for someone having problems... I feel it's very important I'm there with them. It's establishing relationships with people. When things are very involved it's better to sit down with people.

While over half of the respondents were not bothered about whether people used email to communicate with them or met them face to face, eleven (39 percent) expressed a preference for face to face communication.

Email has not reduced the need for *meetings* or the amount of time spent at them.

While emails can be used to schedule or remind about meetings, send agendas, get some of the preliminary work done and delegate or follow up on action points after a meeting, meetings, either on a one-to-one or small or large group basis, are still a major component of a manager's day and play a very important role in getting the work of an organisation done.

One manager commented that a meeting is the best way of ensuring the full participation and support of all those involved:

If there's any kind of negotiation involved or clarification of tasks or role or function or who's accountable as a lot more people have to buy into it. The problem with email is that sometimes other people can't see the buy in.

Also mentioned were the importance of meetings for teambuilding and so that everybody gets to hear the same things at the same time.

When a quick response is required, *the telephone* wins out over email. The telephone is often used also to make the initial contact or, as with face to face communication, if there's a desire to convey more than just the text message.

Letters seem to be used now only when greater formality is required and when there's a need for the organisation's logo to appear on the communication. In these situations an email is not seen to be adequate.

Email has basically replaced the *memo*. However, a memo may still be sent if, for example, a signature is required.

Functions served by email

The corpus of 275 emails was analysed using speech act analysis. Two important functions dominated: giving information and making requests. The main function of nearly half of the messages was to give information. In a work situation this is clearly one of the main roles carried out by email. The second most important function was the making of requests. As making a request is a face-threatening act which places an imposition on the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987) it is perhaps surprising that such a high percentage of emails have this as their main function. However, a wide range of strategies is used to minimise the effect of the imposition. One common strategy is to justify the reason for the request. In a number of emails the two functions of information giving and making a request are combined, with information given as a background or prelude to a request.

The third most important function (but of considerably less importance than giving information or making requests) is that of seeking information. This includes such things as seeing whether someone is free for a meeting,

straight information requests, and the seeking of advice, opinions or guidance.

Twelve percent of the emails included material with an expressive function and it was the main function of nine percent of the messages. A not uncommon pattern is for an expression of regret or thanks to be included as part of an email giving information.

People seldom commit themselves to doing something via email. Commissives made up only six percent of the speech act functions and were the main function of only four percent of the messages. In the case of commissives it is not unusual for a person to give information and as part of that to make a commitment to doing something.

Just over half of the emails served one function while the remainder served more than one function. There were a small number of examples in the corpus of an email having one function for one person or group of people and another function for someone else. For example an email might give information to a group and signal out an individual to meet some request. Some six percent of the total number of messages fulfilled three functions. One fulfilled five functions.

Request types

More indirect (47 percent) than direct requests (38 percent) were made. Fifteen percent of all requests were made in the form of hints.

While one might expect people to be more direct if they are making a request of a subordinate, the data does not bear this out. The ratio of direct to indirect requests made by superiors and subordinates was not greatly different. There was however, a greater tendency to be indirect or make a hint in requests made to a group.

Table 1 Effect of status on request type. Percentage of direct requests, indirect requests and hints.

Request Type	Request made to:		
	A superior N=40	A subordinate N=49	A group N=21
Direct	37	41	24
Indirect	47	45	57
Hint	15	14	19

Gender, on the other hand, bears some relationship to the type of request made.

Table 2: Effect of gender on request type

Request type	Direct N=44	Indirect N=54	Hints N=18	Total %
Male %	42	43	14	99
Female %	32	51	17	100

The data shows that in making a request men make approximately the same number of direct and indirect requests, 42 percent and 43 percent respectively. Women on the other hand, have a much higher proportion of indirect requests (51 percent compared to 32 percent direct). Holmes (1995:8) comments that selecting the appropriate grammatical construction may convey greater or lesser politeness, and, more specifically, that there is some evidence that females favour mitigated directives while males tend to use more direct forms (1995: 187). Making requests indirectly by using hedges and modal verbs such as *would* and *could* to soften them, is one form of linguistic politeness. Obviously the context in which a request is made is important eg people who know each other well are more likely to be direct in their dealings but the greater use of indirectness by women in making requests tends to suggest greater linguistic politeness.

Message length and number of paragraphs

Email's value as a fast and efficient way of getting the work of the organisation done, is reflected in the length of the messages. In general email messages are concise and to the point. Eight of the messages in this corpus didn't extend beyond the subject line. The average message length of 51 words, including the subject line and the greetings and sign-off does not allow for a lot of verbiage. On average the messages written by the women in this corpus were ten per cent longer than those of the men, a difference that is somewhat surprising given that men have been shown (Herring:2000) to write considerably longer messages than women on the internet and to dominate the speaking time in face to face meetings. If, as she concludes, this dominance pattern is due not to the nature of the medium but rather a learned behaviour 'carried over from off-line social and professional contexts' one would expect male messages to be longer. It may be that in the workplace there is a need to send information quickly and to keep it concise, which is not the case in the more recreational context of an internet chat group, and that this counters the need to control the discourse. Also it is not clear that *more* 'talk' /writing is a control strategy in a written context.

Not surprisingly with such short messages, there are few paragraphs. The average number of paragraphs in this corpus was 1.76. The subject line and greeting, if there was one, were not counted as paragraphs. Nor was the person's name at the end. However, a closing formula such as *Kind regards* or *Thanks* was.

The greeting and sign-off

Two thirds of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that it was important to start an email message with a greeting, and sign it off. As both the greeting and the sign-off are superfluous in the sense that the format of the email means that the sender and receiver are known to each other, why then are they considered important? There seem to be two reasons:

- ♦ they provide a personal touch and a warmth that it is hard otherwise to inject into the informal media that is email and in this way do some of the work of relationship building in an organisation.

- ♦ the type of greeting or sign-off can also be used to send a message of distance, solidarity or expectation.

While nearly all of those interviewed felt that it was important to use them, most were not offended if they weren't present. This was just as well since in this corpus greetings and sign-offs were not the norm. As shown below, gender and status have some influence on the presence or absence of these and their nature but interestingly, not solidarity. Three categories of solidarity were used: friend defined as someone you interact socially with outside of work, close colleague (someone you have a lot to do with at work) distant colleague (someone you may interact with occasionally or not at all). There was no relationship shown between the absence or presence of a greeting and the social distance between people. Whether or not the message is addressed to a group or an individual also has some effect.

Greetings

As the table below shows about 60 percent of the messages began without any form of greeting while another 25 percent started simply with the person's name. The choice of whether or not to use a greeting may have something to do with whether the message is the start of a communication or part of an ongoing dialogue. 123 of the messages were first communications about a topic. This equates approximately to the number of messages that contained a greeting (116). A closer analysis is necessary to see whether the greetings belong mainly to the first communication. The lack of greetings may reflect the 'get down to business straight away' nature of email workplace communication especially once the initial contact has been made. Only 16 percent of the messages contained any general greeting such as *Hi*, and of those that did *Hi* was the most popular (23 messages) followed by *Dear* (7) *Good Morning* (7) and *Hello* (4). Two messages used *Kia ora*, one of which accommodated to the ethnicity of the receiver. This contrasts strongly with what Crystal (2001: 94-128) found. Two thirds of a sample of 500 emails in his Deleted folder from people who knew him, contained an introductory greeting. He also found that + *Dear* messages were twice as common as - *Dear* messages and that *Dear* was by far the most frequent individual greeting formula. In my study *Dear* was the greeting in only 2 per cent of the messages. This may be attributable to the greater formality of English society, and to the fact that in my corpus, many of the messages were quickly sent responses between people who knew each other.

The greetings were analysed to see what effect, if any, the following social variables had: gender, status, social distance. Gender and status were seen to have some effect on the use of greetings but not social distance.

Table 3: Greetings: Effect of gender

Greeting Type	Whole corpus N = 275	Total Male N = 158	Total Female N = 117
No Greeting: %	60	66	54
Greeting word only %	7	1	3
First name only %	25	22	31
Greeting word + first name %	9	11	12

Gender: Women acknowledged their addressee more frequently than men. Two thirds of the messages written by men contained no acknowledgement of the sender or greeting of any sort compared to 54 percent of those written by women. Nearly a third of the emails written by women started with the person's name compared to fewer than a quarter of those written by men. Salutations such as *Dear*, *Hi*, *Hello* with or without the person's name, were seldom used by either sex but were favoured slightly more by women. When used, they were usually accompanied by the person's name. Interestingly, when men did start their message with the person's name or a greeting this was more likely to be in a message to a group or to another male than to a woman. Nearly three-quarters of the messages written to women started without a greeting, while the corresponding figure for messages written to another male or a group was 59 percent. The pattern was reversed for women writing to men. The figures show women using the addressee's first name or a greeting more often when they are writing to men than when they are writing to another woman or to a group.

It has been noted (Holmes 1995: 48) that in many contexts females are more likely than males to pay attention to the social and affective aspects of an interaction. Women's greater use of indirect as opposed to direct requests (see above) greetings and sign-offs (see below) all of which show positive politeness or an identification with the addressee, would tend to support this.

Table 4: Greetings: Effect of Status

Greeting Type	Emails between equals No=13	Upward moving emails No=99	Downward moving emails No=99	Emails to a group No=64
No Greeting :%	77	47	71	70
Greeting word only %	0	3	0	8
First name only %	23	35	20	3
Greeting word + first name %	0	15	8	19

Status also seemed to have some effect on the presence or absence of greetings. There was a greater tendency to address a person by name or to include a greeting in messages sent up the hierarchical line than vice-versa. The corresponding figure for the corpus as a whole was 40 percent. Messages sent to a group and up the hierarchy were also more likely to contain both a greeting and a name than downward moving messages.

The sign-off

In spite of the preference expressed by those surveyed to have a sign-off, over one third of the messages ended without one while approximately another third ended with the writer's first name only. This emphasises the need to have actual statistical data since what people say is very often different to what they do. In other words, 60 percent of the messages finished without a sign-off or with just the writer's first name. Only a small percentage contained some kind of farewell formula. *Cheers* (14 messages) and *Regards* (15)² rivalled each other as farewell formulas. *Thanks* is used quite frequently to bring an email to a close. Sometimes it is used genuinely to express thanks for something done or in anticipation of the meeting of a request, but there are also a number of instances where it is used just as a ritual closing formula.³

Table 5 Sign-offs: Effect of gender

Type of sign-off	Whole corpus	Male	Female
	No=164	No=111	
	%	%	%
No sign-off	39	40	36
First name only	32	35	25
First name + surname	3	4	0
Farewell formula only (e.g. <i>Cheers</i>)	1	2	2
Farewell formula + name	8	7	17
<i>Thanks</i> only	3	2	4
<i>Thanks</i> + name	13	10	16
Total (No = 275)	99	100	100

Gender: Some differences were noted in the way in which men and women end their emails. While there was very little difference between the number of men who used a close or sign-off of some sort and the number of women who did so, women were less likely to terminate their messages with their name only. If a farewell formula or thanks was used as a close, women were more likely than men to accompany it with their name. Women were nearly twice as likely as men to conclude their messages with a farewell formula or *thanks* accompanied by their name.

² The number of times *Regards* is used is distorted by the fact that it was the close used in ten out of the fifteen emails sent by one correspondent.

³ Again this is very different to what Crystal found. Eighty percent of his interpersonal messages ended with a pre-close such as *Best wishes*, *See you soon*, *Lots of love*, *Thanks*. The other 20 percent gave a name.

Status was seen to have some effect on whether or not the message is signed-off. More messages sent to higher-ranking people were signed-off than those to lower-ranking people. The most common sign-off was a name. Greater use was made of *Thanks*, with or without the sender's name in messages sent to higher ranking persons than to lower-ranking persons. However, the greatest likelihood of there being a sign-off was if the message was sent to a group. Nearly three quarters of the messages sent to a group had a sign-off of some sort. These were mainly *Thanks* followed by the sender's name or a first name only.

Table 6 Sign-offs: Effect of status

Type of sign-off	Emails between equals	Upward moving emails	Downward moving emails	Emails to a group
	No=15	No=102	No=103	No=55
	%	%	%	%
No sign-off	46	33	47	22
First name only	20	36	30	29
First name + surname	0	1	0	7
Farewell formula only (e.g. <i>Cheers</i>)	0	5	4	2
Farewell formula + name	13	7	9	9
<i>Thanks</i> only	13	5	4	2
<i>Thanks</i> + name	7	12	7	29
Total (No = 275)	99	99	101	100

The subject line

All the emails in the corpus contained a subject line. The importance of the subject line is indicated by the fact that over 80 percent of those surveyed said that they always or almost always tried to write a clear and informative subject line. People interviewed also attested to its importance. The subject line enables the message recipient to see at a glance whether or not the email needs to be read and may also indicate its urgency or importance. The practice of using DNO (Do Not Open) which is widespread in this workplace and perhaps unique to it, is one that was commented on positively by a number of people. It provides a means of sending a short message without the necessity for the message to be opened.

Email's hidden messages

A number of those interviewed commented that the words on the page are not the only message that an email sends. The absence or presence of a greeting or sign-off and what this 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 are being sent outside the organisation.

Miscommunication in email

Because email gives no visual, auditory or physical cues, yet is seen by most (63 percent of those surveyed) as being more like speech than writing, there is a greater potential for miscommunication and communication breakdown than with other forms of communication. Unlike speaking, emails do not provide the opportunity for on the spot clarification and they tend to be more minimalist than letters. Communication breakdown can happen when emails are so brief or abbreviated that the meaning is no longer clear. This can also happen with emails that are so long-winded that the message is lost in the verbiage. Other main causes of communication breakdown mentioned by the respondents are too many typos, incorrect or mismatching dates, jargon that is understood by the sender but not the receiver, and emails that make assumptions. For example an email may relate back to a previous email without the history being forwarded on, or to an earlier conversation without this being directly referred to. As such emails are time wasting, they are also a source of annoyance.

The findings show that the email which is most likely to foster good working relationships and do its intended work is one that has the following features:

- ◆ A subject line which clearly defines the topic.
- ◆ A greeting and a sign-off unless it is part of an on-going dialogue
- ◆ A message that is
 - ◆ 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;
 - ◆ clear, coherent, unambiguous and accurate;
 - ◆ courteous and avoids the use of unnecessary capital letters, exclamation marks, underlining and the colour red. These can convey anger;
 - ◆ sparing in its use of emoticons or smiley faces as many people don't like these;
 - ◆ work-related and relevant to the recipient;
 - ◆ not normally sent to someone sitting physically close. In general, people do not appreciate being sent an email by someone who could easily pass on that message in person;
 - ◆ acknowledged by being promptly responded to. Eighty-five per cent of those surveyed expected a response within one or two days.

The above findings relate, however, to only one workplace. A similar study, also as part of the Language in the Workplace project, is currently being carried out in another, very different workplace

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