



E-mail characteristics, work performance and distress

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to examine how e-mail affects work performance. E-mail communication studies have aroused both praise and query regarding the suitability, appropriateness and effectiveness of electronic messages in information management. Less is known about the effects of e-mail on work performance. We consider (1) which e-mail features affect work performance; (2) whether these features are differentially associated with positive (work effectiveness) or negative (stress and distress) side-effects; and (3) whether individual- and organizational-level characteristics are associated with positive and/or negative work performance. Using a secondary level analysis based on the Pew and American Life sample we show that extent, content, and increased volume of e-mail are (a) more frequently reported by managers than by non-managers (b) age, gender, marital status and education can become a critical issue (c) the amount of e-mail received and sent is positively related to work performance. These findings suggest that assessing the costs and benefits of electronic communication should cover individual features as well as e-mail-related features to assess their impact on work performance.

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1. Introduction

Information is vital to improved organizational performance. Inevitably, this has precipitated both scholars and management into the world of the “information–revolution” (Freeman & Louca, 1999) and the way that organizational agents contribute to organizational success by interpreting and using information to improve organizational competencies and performance, reinforcing the link between organizational and employee work performance (Landauer, 1995). Deriving from the premise that the more information provided to the employee the higher the level of work performance (Hogg, 2000; Olson & Lucas, 1982), the immediacy of the channel (PCs) and the carrier (Internet) are examined in relation to work effectiveness, work stress and distress.

Electronic communication is vital to accessibility, quantity, and quality of information. PCs are constantly allocated and relocated, and technology-based tools are constantly upgraded and increasingly in demand. PCs and carriers (Internet) alike are identified with effectiveness and improved organizational performance of which e-mail is considered the most satisfactory tool (Davenport & Prusak, 1998) because it is easily and quickly created, edited, stored, discarded or organized, appended and forwarded to the relevant recipients (Ducheneaut & Watts, 2005; Olson & Lucas, 1982).

The need for efficient but inexpensive modes of communication, for sharing information and knowledge (Figallo & Rhine, 2002; Weick, 1995) generates increased electronic interaction (Gupta, Karimi, & Somers, 2000) and can, for example, improve management processes by enhancing inter-departmental communication, which may significantly affect inter-departmental relations (Lucas, 1998; Olson & Lucas, 1982). E-mail is similarly an important communication mode when it is necessary to cover large geographic areas with a minimum increase in physical working space such as when organizations adopt virtual functioning operations and capitalize on increased electronic interaction (Gupta et al., 2000).

As a result, for some, e-mail's inherent properties (low cost, speed of communication, ease of use) and “technical neutrality” minimize potential communication distortions caused by differences in occupational, ethnic or gender characteristics of the communicators (Romm & Pliskin, 1999). However, some studies have questioned the appropriateness and effectiveness of electronic messages, and raised questions in regard to the impact of information management on employees' wellbeing (Hogg, 2000; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) including work-related stress and job dissatisfaction (Ingham, 2003; Lewis, 1999, p. 4).

This paper addresses the relationship between e-mail and work performance. We investigate the association between four e-mail features: (a) extent–number of people you have regular exchange of e-mail with, (b) intensity – frequency of checking e-mail before and after work, (c) content–proportion of work-related e-mails sent daily and (d) increase – the proportion of work-related e-mail recently sent and received and employees' (a) work effectiveness, (b)

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work-related stress, and (c) work-related distress. All items examined here are included in the Pew and American Life data set (2002).

E-mail related variables have been provided in the literature mainly in relation to the impact of information flow (Drucker, 1999; Hogg, 2000; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003b; Lewis, 1999) and information content (Belloti, Ducheneaut, Howard, Smith, & Grinter, 2005). While the literature provides information about different types of work-related content such as announcements or information that is necessary to perform one's task the data set used here does not enable such a distinction (Hovick, Meyers, & Timmerman, 2003).

Moreover, according to Taylor, Fieldman, and Altman (2008) the term work effectiveness examined here is considered as the positive aspect of performance, the one that increases the individual potential to provide more and/or better work-related outcomes. Stress and distress are, by contrast, the aspects of e-mail transactions that may have negative effects on work performance. This distinction follows previous studies suggesting that the inclusion of such items as e-mail based interactions with team members (Straus & McGrath, 1994), saving time, and being available are positive whereas use of e-mail may as well lead to undesirable effects such as disputes and misunderstanding (Friedman and Currall (2003), and a decrease in appropriate judgment based evaluations (Straus & McGrath, 1994). We content here that some characteristics of e-mail may lead to increased stress and distress (Ingham, 2003; Pitney Bows, 2000).

Moreover, in the present study we include a set of individual level characteristics. Demographic characteristics, such as age and family responsibilities, may determine how e-mail and the flow of information have positive or negative effects (Burgess, Jackson, & Edwards, 2005; Oppenheim, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Employees' skills are critical to the successful management of information as well (e.g. Burke, 1996; Olson & Lucas, 1982; Storey & Quintas, 2001). Similarly, employees' organizational position as managers and professional skills may further influence how e-mail is evaluated either as necessary or as a burden (Belloti et al., 2005; Bontis, Crossan, & Hulland, 2002). Finally, following Taylor et al. (2008) we also introduce organizational size to partially control for some of the organizational level variation in the examined link between e-mail characteristics and work performance (Edmunds & Morris, 2000).

Accordingly, we pose and try to answer the following three questions:

- RQ1: What features of e-mail communication affect work performance?
- RQ2: How are these features associated with positive (work effectiveness) and negative (stress and distress) aspects of work performance?
- RQ3: How are individual and organizational-level characteristics associated with positive and negative aspects of e-mail on work performance?

The study thus forms an interdisciplinary link between technical and human factors, and demonstrates how this affects three facets of work performance, (i.e. effectiveness, stress, and distress¹).

2. Literature review

Work performance has long been a major focus of interest in organization studies. Despite academic and other differences in

the concept, work performance can essentially be viewed as an individual's contribution to transforming organizational inputs into organizational outputs where work performance has been and still is considered to be the core of organizational competence. Accordingly, organizations make concerted efforts to introduce all possible means of improving and maintaining high work performance levels, on the assumption that deterioration of individual capabilities at work will damage organizational performance. The use of e-mail has long been considered as a major facilitator in enabling employees to gain quick and easy access to the latest sources of information and to contact people especially when organizations become more complex and cope with competitive environments (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1986; Drucker, 1999; Hogg, 2000).

This link between information and work performance has generally been addressed from two distinct but overlapping perspectives. The "technological" approach focuses on what the new technologies can offer (Boisot, 1998), the leverage for organizational practices, and the "human focus" or "socio-technical" (McGregor, 1960; Olson & Lucas, 1982) approach emphasizing the social aspect, claiming that information is essentially the property of both individuals and groups (Boisot, 1998; Markus, 1994a).

On the technological side, different models provide rationales for the integration and use of e-mail in organizations. Media choice theories discuss how people choose which medium to use to communicate with others; assuming that the intrinsic properties of the media influence the quality of information supplied individuals seem to be aware of the way that differences in communication modalities support social exchanges. Most studies have compared text-based, computer-mediated communication with face-to-face communication. Online communication is considered of lower quality than communication by phone or face-to-face (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002). Computer-mediated communication lacks the social presence clues that are essential for good communication which affect individuals' preference of media. The basic assumption is that individuals will select a medium with a social presence commensurate with the task they wish to accomplish (Hollingshead & Noshir, 2002). The Media-Richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) extrapolated this idea, suggesting that types of communication differ in the "richness" of information that they provide, the ability to provide multiple cues (verbal and non-verbal) and immediate feedback. In both cases, e-mail is deemed to provide lower social presence and fewer cues than other media because it is textual communication.

"Socio-technologically" there are desirable and undesirable effects of e-mail and information use that are not entirely attributable to the technology itself, but rather to how it is used in organizations. There are social factors that influence individuals' perceptions and use of media. Choice of media is influenced by co-workers and supervisors, and by factors such as time, distance, accessibility and support. However, e-mail has been found to generate negative outcomes as well such as 'politicking' and 'petty tyranny' (Ashforth, 1994; Romm, Pliskin, & Rifkin, 1996). One commentator notes that "it made it possible to do more work, but not to do work more productively", presenting the "productivity puzzle" of information society and concerns regarding the "productivity paradox" (Grise & Gallupe, 2000; Landauer, 1995, p. 75). It is apparent that information and knowledge are difficult to manage and organize (Storey & Quintas, 2001), and immediate information dissemination routes such as e-mail can have both functional and dysfunctional effects on employees' wellbeing and work performance (Taylor et al., 2008). Thus, recipients' characteristics may hinder improved performance because employees may not necessarily be "involved" or "specialized" to need a constant flow of information and in other cases a slow flow of information may increase work stress particularly when the tasks performed necessitate the participation of others or cannot be completed until a specific response is received (Belloti et al., 2005).

¹ The aim of the present study is not to investigate psychological or attitudinal links between work components, but to assess how each of these components is affected by use of the e-mail.

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