

Workplace E-mail: Reading Between the Lines

By Lynn Koller

Shoes reveal a lot about the wearer. Casual sandals versus formal wingtips may reflect a wearer's confidence—or lack of social grace—while expensive Bruno Magli loafers or Manolo Blahnik pumps may lead to assumptions of high wealth and status. Apparently, e-mail and shoes share common ground, at least according to David Owens, assistant professor of management at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. Owens co-authored a study, "Technologies of Status Management: Status Dynamics in E-mail Communications," which demonstrates how employees with low, medium and high status use e-mail to maintain their footing in the workplace.

While interpreting electronic missives between co-workers may be an entertaining study of pop psychology, banks are taking seriously what their employees say to each other via e-mail. A poor or non-existent e-mail policy may expose a bank to legal action, loss of productivity and ineffective communication. An excessively stringent policy, however, may thwart employees' use of an effective tool for increasing cohesiveness within their organization.

Owens' study points out that previous research suggested computer-based communication may decrease status differences, because compared to face-to-face contact, people have fewer social cues to rely upon, such as dress, mannerisms and interruptions. However, he finds that e-mail contains a number of cues that reveal a person's status.

In face-to-face situations, Owens says that low-status individuals are more likely to increase the cohesiveness of a group with behaviors that give them a useful role. This often includes flattering others and volunteering for menial tasks. By being unthreatening, they secure their place within the group, focusing on social and emotional roles.

Medium-status individuals are more likely to engage in contesting behaviors, particularly those that increase the value of their expertise. They may use technical jargon or attempt to reframe a problem so that it falls into their domain of expertise.

Those at the top status level are more prone to make dominating moves to control the group. They might constantly summarize a group's progress, interrupt others and reinforce their status. Owens states that high-status individuals often are more directed at controlling the status-managing behaviors of others than at explicit task performance.

Take Note

All in a Day's Work

According to a 2001 Gartner report, 64% of at-work Internet users in the United States check their e-mail regularly during the day. Users manage their e-mail an average of 49 minutes each workday.

Intra-organization messaging accounts for much of the traffic. For example, Bob Justus, vice president at San Francisco-based Union Bank of California, says that his bank's 9,800 employees transmit about 82,000 e-mails daily, and 65,000 of those are internal.

respond to upwardly directed e-mail. In addition, signature files—text at the end of a message typically containing contact information—can relay more information than meets the eye. Including titles and academic degrees is an obvious way to show status. Even the inclusion of a phone extension can signal a sender's integration in the organization and show that he or she has a permanent office. Lower-status individuals are more likely to include messages with socio-emotional content, such as "Reach for the Dream! :-)"

Unfortunately, the disparity in communication approaches means that a teller and a bank chairman can have different ideas about appropriate use of e-mail.

Harold Brewer, chief executive of Brintech, a bank consultancy located in New Smyrna Beach, FL, describes a situation at a 1,000-employee financial institution in which he previously worked. Brewer took action after receiving an All Users message—the function allowing a user to instantly send e-mail to everyone in the organization. The message, from a low-level staffer, contained personal information about a co-worker's medical status. Brewer calculated how many hours were expended with 1,000 users viewing the message, determined the content was of questionable merit to most employees and implemented a strict, work-only e-mail policy. At Blairsville, GA-based holding company United Community Banks Inc., where he is chief operating officer, Brewer helped to apply a similar policy.

Employees who dispatch an All Users e-mail may not understand possible ramifications, Owens observes. "It's as if they thought they were talking around the water cooler, but they were actually standing up on a stage, shouting this personal business to all the world." Owens also says that while the message may seem unimportant, such personal dialogue may have benefits worth preserving. "To these employees, this may be the most meaningful thing of being there at work. This is their community, and this channel allows them that communication."

He suggests that the bank could segment the e-mail audience and create mailing lists with specific social topics that allow employees to strengthen their community. He cites research on space relationships that show if employees work on different floors, they are very unlikely to interact. "It turns out that a staircase is a huge barrier," Owens says. "The nice thing about e-mail is it obliterates the staircase." Space relationships become particularly relevant in a work environment that includes multiple branches, telecommuters and traveling employees.

Heather Gatley, an attorney and partner at Steel, Hector & Davis LLP, a 200-attorney law firm based in Miami, says that floods of internal e-mails should concern banks. She helps financial institutions and other corporate clients develop e-mail policies that meet regulatory requirements and reduce legal liabilities. Gatley says that some eradicate personal e-mail completely, while most endorse limited personal use.

"I also tell clients to disable the e-mail system so that it only replies to sender. A lot of times, people send to all users inadvertently," Gatley says.

United Community Banks has done that with its e-mail system, Brewer says. In addition, only a few employees have the capability to send an All Users e-mail. And if Brewer receives an e-mail he thinks is irrelevant to him, he does not equivocate. "I don't hesitate to fire back to somebody that I don't really need a copy of this," he says.

Not surprisingly, Brewer does not punctuate his e-mails with smiley faces, winking faces or other symbols known as emoticons. Emoticons are relational indicators that can add layers of meaning to a message. Owens' study cites an actual e-mail from a high-status individual to a work group.

"Hi there. Here is some reading material (attached) in case you don't know how to get through the weekend. ;-)"

While the e-mail contains a direct demand for action, the author softens it with a sarcastic winking of the eye. According to Owens, emoticons can distance an unpleasant command from the sender. And despite the sender in the example, Owens says middle- and low-status employees are most likely to employ emoticons. Middle-status employees use the demonstrative keystrokes to mitigate the negativity of their messages, while the latter may simply be asking people to like them.

Not all banks are anti-emoticon. San Francisco-based Union Bank of California, with \$35.5 billion in assets, featured a directory of emoticons in one of its newsletters, including instructions on how to view them.

"To read a smiley, you need to tilt your head onto your left shoulder." It goes on to illustrate 13 popular emoticons, along with their meanings. For example, :-X means "My lips are sealed! I won't tell anybody, I promise!"

Never trust a punctuated face, however; keeping secrets is not guaranteed in e-mail. With one click, a message can begin a complicated journey, leaving its footprint at thousands of desktops along the way. Messages containing ethnic slurs, explicit sexuality and privileged information can spread like viruses and cause as much damage.

Legal liability has led many banks to review their internal e-mail policies and enact changes. "The most important thing in the e-mail policy is that employees should be restricted from using language or committing acts that they couldn't otherwise do in person," Gatley says.

While Owens has no problem with e-mail policies, he says that managers should pay attention to the messages they send while enforcing rules. Those messages in themselves might be saying more than is intended. "Your own e-mail communications may have this domineering characteristic where you're being a traffic cop and just managing everyone else's status," he says.

Like a good pair of shoes, e-mail should fit the user and the occasion. Perhaps the best advice is that bank management should develop an internal e-mail policy that promotes productivity and protects the organization, but also allows some freedom for emotional and social growth. Often, the best shoes are the ones that allow for a little wiggle room. :-)

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Data File

Lingo and Level

How one writes an e-mail can say a lot about where that person is in the corporate food chain.

Top level individuals

More prone to make dominating moves to control the group. More often control the status-managing behaviors of others than explicit task performance. Don't expect smiley faces here. :-|

Medium-status individuals

More likely to engage in contesting behaviors that increase the value of their expertise. May use technical jargon or attempt to reframe a problem so that it falls into their domain of expertise. Might use emoticons to buffer severity of requests, etc. ;-)

Low-status individuals

More likely to increase the cohesiveness of a group with behaviors that give them a useful role. Includes flattering others and volunteering for menial tasks. It's usually a smiley free-for-all at this level. :-)

"The lowest and highest are both maintaining their status," Owens says. "The low-status people have the choice of not being in the group or being in the group. The high-status people want to maintain that, because there's nowhere else to go."

Owens finds that e-mail messages serve to reinforce patterns established in face-to-face communication, rather than equalizing status. For instance, response time to an e-mail correlates directly to the status level of recipients. The higher the status, the longer they take to

Solutions

On the Write Track

For banks concerned that their employees' status-managing e-mails may disrupt the sanctity of the workplace, filtering tools may help. This type of software can automatically sweep e-mail and attachments for keywords, and then quarantine or tag messages meeting certain criteria. If a message contains ethnic slurs or the word "sex," for example, it might be tagged for inspection.

"Banks often use the tools to do things like check that salespeople aren't making wild claims, and that suitable disclaimers are included in the e-mail," says David Ferris, president of San Francisco-based Ferris Research Inc.

Tumbleweed Communications Corp., located in Redwood City, CA, offers a content filtering and e-mail management product with its Message Management System.

MIMESweeper is a suite of products from Dublin-based Baltimore Technologies PLC that monitors e-mail content. Cost of that system is \$20 monthly per user, with discounts depending on the number of users.

BMO Nesbitt Burns, a brokerage house based in Toronto, uses MIMESweeper for external e-mail and has plans to implement it for internal e-mail in the next fiscal year. "We can do keyword analysis on the flow of messages, examining the content of the message or type of attachments and quarantine or filter anything that meets our criteria," says Bob Jones, manager of security and contingency planning.

BMO Nesbitt Burns has about 8,000 users who send approximately 400,000 e-mails a day, 290,000 of which are intra-organizational. Two years ago, when the Melissa Virus disabled thousands of computers, the brokerage house was able to scan for keywords to prevent infection of the network—even before the virus protection software could be updated.