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# DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT E-MAIL! TECHNOLOGY'S POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO BULLYING

Alison Ruth

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores processes in electronic communication, specifically email, and the ways in which this technology can contribute to counterproductive workplace behaviours leading to, and including, bullying. It uses three case studies of people who use email in their daily work. The study points to a number of issues which have a negative impact on workers, stemming from lack of understanding of the blurred boundaries between formal and informal communication by email. It elaborates three levels of behaviour that point to the potential for email to be used as a mode of bullying and provides strategies for reducing these potentials.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying; electronic communication

## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of email into nearly every corner of our lives has been phenomenal with many workplaces coming to rely on its ease of use and quick interactions (Purdy 2008, Lifehacker.com). For instance, Haas and Hansen (2001 p49) comment that email is generally regarded as a form of “informal correspondence” that involves “direct personal contact”. This is because there is an assumption that individuals exchanging emails know each other and can tailor their message to the recipient. This is confirmed by Waldvogel (2007) who elaborated how greetings and closing in email perform an important social function in communication. Waldvogel’s premise points to what UNESCO (2005) defines as ‘functional literacy’ or the ability to function within society. This paper analyses ‘functional literacy’ within the context of using email in business environments with particular reference to the use of email within the workplace.

The perception that email is useful and beneficial (Minsky and Marin, 1999) means that people are more likely to use it. Mitra et al. (1999) found that the availability of technology does not necessarily suggest its use; there must be a clearly seen advantage to the use of it. Beyond this, the simple act of being able to contact all colleagues leads to it as a default solution to the problem of delivering information (cf Whitty and Carr, 2006).

Email has become so commonplace in the workplace that Taylor (2004), in a study of 5 forms of computer mediated knowledge management (including email), found 81% of workers used email at least several times a week. This makes email one of the most pervasive technologies. While much research still points to the positive impacts of email on work (see for instance Bhatt, et al, 2005), email is also perhaps, the most misunderstood means of communication. Many of these misunderstandings potentially lead to examples of counterproductive behaviours, which may lead to bullying, becoming prevalent in workplaces through technological mediation, although this was not expected (Baruch, 2005).

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This leads to Grønning referring to a number of “paradoxes of email” (2005, p5) stemming from a) the confusion of whether email is a formal or informal communication channel; b) the amount of information contained in this relatively new communication channel; c) lack of quality control resulting from misunderstanding or not knowing about “e-communication policies” (p4) in the workplace and d) the often limited skills and lack of training in the use of email communication. Luke (2007) charts the shift from electronic mail, *a thing that people received* to *a thing that people do* noting that in a hyperconnected world “reading is undergoing subtle shifts from the exclusively bookish horizontal direction of left to right text chunking to vertical scanning as we scroll and fix on key words” (Luke, 2007, p53). These shifts have produced different rates of reading and different perceptions by many people with the subtleties often missed in the speed of transfer and need to respond rapidly. This is also highlighted by Skovholt and Svennevig (2006, p42) who point to new technologies requiring new “forms of competence in addressing multiple participants with varying participation statuses and amounts of background knowledge”.

Even so, email systems are valuable for contact across time and space making it ideal for potentially consolidating positive workplace relationships. It allows the “sharing of encoded knowledge” (McMahon et al 2004, p312) that belongs to the organisation to provide a form of intersubjectivity or shared understandings (Rogoff, 1990, Hung, Looi and Koh, 2004). However, as noted by Grønning (2005, p5) “email has a kind of secret life in the organization” that creates a series of email paradoxes. For instance, email has been shown to be a “new route” for bullying behaviour and this has rarely been studied in any depth to date (Baruch, 2005, p361).

The specific focus of this investigation is on how email, as an asynchronous communication technology, contributes to the perception of, and actual incidences, of counter-productive behaviours in the workplace. Technologies are often referred to as “disruptive” (Conole et al, 2008, Blin and Munroe, 2008, Hair et al, 2007) leading to the ready potential to develop counter-productive behaviour amongst users as traditional ways of engaging with colleagues shifts, sometimes subtly, sometime more dramatically. Email has shifted the balance of process towards a mass-distribution network which can lead to its generalised use of it even to the detriment of workplace harmony when there is an increasing risk of disrupting the work processes of colleagues. All this highlights the need for a greater level of ‘functional literacy’ in Business Environments with specific reference to email.

This investigation focuses on the ways in which the contradictions contribute to negative workplace behaviours. The data comes from three users explaining their perception of email. The users were chosen because they had experience of varying degrees of ‘unpleasantness’ resulting from email use. While not all of these users related specific incidences of bullying, the insights gained from these regular and sometimes reticent users are valuable for the identification of factors which can contribute to bullying by email and the perceptions of bullying by email.

The paper therefore contributes a schema for recognising the contribution that email makes to counter productive behaviours in the workplace including bullying. The paper concludes with strategies for prevention of email bullying and suggestions for further research.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research is conducted within a case study framework, which according to Tellis (1997: online) satisfies the “three tenets of qualitative method: describing, understanding and explaining” a particular social phenomenon. Stake (2000, p444) describes a case as “something to be described and interpreted”. The use of email in different contexts each becomes a case, in this research, described by a single individual whose insights to specific ways in which email are used in organisational contexts.

This research is the culmination of the collection of numerous anecdotes concerning technological innovation as told to a researcher of new technologies. It is almost inevitable when research into communicative technology is mentioned, that listeners relate their stories. These stories provide insights into perceptions of technology leading to counter-productive behaviours which are useful in the development of training and understanding how counter-productive behaviours are developed particularly when these behaviours are mediated by technology and are thus seen as potentially less threatening. Individuals were chosen on the basis of a comment made to the researcher during the course of normal conversation about research into technology enhanced working and when email was mentioned, generally replied ‘don't talk to me about email’. This indicated to the researcher that there was an issue of the use of email in the user's workplace. These people were subsequently interviewed for their perceptions of the use of email and how that led to counter-productive behaviours.

A narrative approach was used as a simple prompt such as ‘what do you think about email’ or ‘what is it about email’ elicited the unfolding of events or sequences, a story, that provide context for the issues. Feldman et al (2004) found the likelihood of informants providing information via means of a story was quite high.

The response from each individual was recorded as a series of points during discussions. These points were arranged into a narrative, which was checked for clarity and accuracy by each participant. Changes were made where meaning was not as the respondent intended.

## THE CASES

Each case includes at least one anecdote in the participant's voice, which exemplifies the problematic issues of email use with their organisational context. It is important to include participants' voices as these embed the research in the organisational context and relate the specifics of these stories to an everyday context.

All the organizations are large organizations, each employing greater than 100 persons. This allows the participants to be fairly anonymous, with little chance of identification of specific individuals in a broader context. All stories have been stripped of any specific details that may identify the individual or the organisation.

### Case 1: A field worker's dilemma

Case One elaborates the use of technology in an Australian branch of a multinational corporation focussing on users within the Australian context. The participant in this case was a technical field worker whose duties included significant travel both within Australia and overseas. The worker was supplied with a laptop computer for accessing email. There are multiple departments dealing with a diverse range of products.

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Emails within the corporation are often sent to ‘all’ subsequently being received by individuals who do not need the information. He states:

*If it was only my department it would be okay, but I get email from all departments and often about things missing from a fridge in [another city].*

The description of his process for dealing with excessive numbers of email sent to all departments included the following:

*If it doesn't have a relevant subject, I delete it. If it isn't directly relevant to my work, I delete it. I don't have time to open every single attachment to find what's important and I figure if they really want me to know, they'll resend it.*

This individual is overwhelmed by the amount of email received. Often the senders do not tailor their messages to specific groups, rather relying on the individual to make sense of multiple emails. In effect, they believe that recipients can decide which emails are meant for them. As a result, individual recipients may decide that if it is not specifically addressed to them, then it will be deleted.

Repeated requests to senders of email (generally the administrative staff in a different departmental office) to apply appropriate subjects and to refrain from using the send-all function when the information is relevant only to a small section of the company have not yet been heeded. Thus the individual has become resistant to the use of email, often feeling harassed by repeat “offenders”, while his colleagues, the administrators, are resistant to his pleas to streamline their processes.

The unthinking use of email as a communication mode and dismissal of the level of inconvenience caused by such use is a form of ‘unconscious’ bullying (Einarsen, 1999) that while seemingly innocuous, nevertheless has impacts on the functioning of the workplace. While no ‘blow-out’ has occurred to date, the feelings of frustration are indicative of the potential for counter productive workplace behaviour.

### **Case 2: An administrator’s nightmare**

Case 2 involves an administrator at a large multicampus university. The administrator's role often requires rapid response to particular issues as manager of communications. The administrator notes that there has been a change in client relationships, particularly around response times:

*I always try to respond in 12 hours but people have unreasonable expectations, and often send another email asking ‘have you read my email’, but sometimes it takes time to develop a response to ensure you deal with all aspects of the enquiry.*

The “unreasonable expectations” point to a form of unconscious bullying (Einarsen, 1999) which is, in some ways, similar to the unthinking use discussed in Case 1. The expectation relates to the rapidity with which email can be sent, with little thought to the requirements of communication.

The administrator elaborated on the nuances of using email referring to responses as often being ‘terse’ which comes across as being rude or abrasive, noting that no-one in her

supervisory chain would speak to her in that way. She notes that some people are 'overly nice' in email and that it then becomes patronising which is 'really annoying'. The participant claims that the tone of email can be 'easily misunderstood'.

*Everyone needs to be working on the same page to prevent blow-ups. You need to think before writing, if you say nothing or say it in the wrong way, it's dangerous.*

The administrator used the word 'dangerous' twice acknowledging the potential for conflict to escalate and noting that it was a 'business contract'. This is seen as a benefit, but depends on other parties to the communication.

*I quite like email. It's better than the phone because you don't miss things but this depends on the individual who is in communicating 'in writing'. ... I really dislike Gen-Y terms in email. There should be formal language – none of this SMS chitchat.*

Needless to say, there is recognition that the technology is not necessarily the problem.

*I think a lot of the limitations are the people, not the technology. I always err on the side of caution. If you can't say it to someone's face ...*

The administrator demonstrated an ability to precisely define multiple ways of bullying, yet she was reticent to elaborate any specific incidences. As a very politically and relatively technology savvy worker (although this is not the self-perception), the administrator appears to function in a way that defuses counterproductive workplace behaviours. The level of awareness appears to have been heightened by being witness to incidents.

### **Case 3: An academic's story**

The academic related a very specific story regarding an inappropriate response from a tutor. The academic had taken over the coordination of a particular large class. The changes made by the academic included significantly 'revamping the tutorials'. In an attempt to give all students a similar experience, she constructed a study guide and a companion tutor's guide for the course. The tutors were required to do some specific activities, although they could base them on their own experiences.

However, one of the tutors proved to be problematic and was following the previous way of doing things in the course. After some attempts to point the particular tutor into the right direction and still receiving vaguely worded complaints from students, she sent an email message to all tutors to clarify the required direction. However, this did not seem to work with the one tutor who was the subject of the complaints. After speaking with colleagues, she sent a direct message to the tutor and copied in the head of department and other lecturers in the course, who still could not see any 'real' problem. She received a response that was, in her words:

*The blast I got back from this tutor was vitriolic. Things in bold and such an accusatory tone. But he had replied to all, so my head of department received it as did all the other lecturers. I think that's when they realised that there were specific problems with this tutor, but as I was the only female on the teaching team, they had all thought it was in my head.*

The academic had noted particular previous attempts to rectify the issue, but, like the administrator, knew that it was better to email certain people to get things in writing because some people do not '*listen properly*'. Even so, the academic realises now that some people still do not appear to 'listen' properly in email. There was a lack of communicative competence apparently demonstrated by the tutor, which resulted in a mismatch of expectations and in turn created controversy.

### **EXPERIENCES OF EMAIL**

These three cases highlight a number of issues. The administrator, while not having specific incidences to which she could refer, knew of incidences that had happened to her colleagues and went to great lengths to avoid similar circumstances. As a result, dealing with email is expanding to fill her day. Her repeated references to email using the word 'dangerous' and the belief that it is, indeed, a business contract means that there are nuances that are readily understood by some workers. This is highlighted by Grønning's (2005) discussions of email paradoxes. These paradoxes are the first stage of the technological contribution to CPWB because they create points of disjuncture between acceptable and non-acceptable uses and behaviours, which may leave at least one participant feeling 'threatened'.

The experiences of the technical field worker, on the other hand, demonstrate some of the issues that arise due to these same nuances going un-recognised. The tendency of some workers to disparage the feelings and frustrations of recipients to multiple emails seems to create an extra level of tension in the workplace. Because remote workers are rarely physically present, the reality of their work processes may not directly impinge upon the awareness of stationary workers. For workers who do not move around, gaining access to their email is a task that is embedded in their work routine. However, for remote workers, there may be a separate process to engage with email that detracts from their main tasks. This may include being on slow connections (such as dial up), which results in extra time to download and process unimportant or unnecessary emails. This form of generic harassment amounts to a 'hostile' but not necessarily 'aggressive' form of interaction with colleagues. The feelings of frustration exhibited by remote workers bare a striking resemblance to the definitions bullying of Einarsen (1999) and Einarsen and Raknes (1997), specifically "repeated and enduring" behaviours that are "perceived as hostile by the recipient" (Einarsen, 1999, 1997) particularly in the light of multiple requests to change the behaviour. This is a second layer of technological contributions to counterproductive workplace behaviours.

The academic's experience points directly to the potential escalation possibilities of email. Even with successive attempts to discuss issues, the perception of the recipient was not the intended outcome of the academic's communication attempt. The academic believed that the email was clear and outlined specific issues. However, the outcome for the tutor (recipient) was to seemingly feel threatened, and thus to attack the academic. This kind of interaction is highly likely given that there is no immediate ability to clarify and no clues as to the body language and other non-verbal aspects of communication. The academic did note that, given a cooling off period, she was able to discuss, with the tutor, the issues at hand and even point out to the tutor that their response was inappropriate. Even with careful construction of a message, the potential for blow outs and escalation is high and clearing these up may require periods of cooling down. This is the third layer of contributions to negative behaviours in the workplace.

Thus, there seems to be a three-levels of processes leading to the potential for bullying by email. These are:

1. non-recognition of the 'paradoxes of email', that is, the uncritical and sometimes unthinking use of email for communication;
2. separation from the person who experiences negative feelings towards particular behaviours (a form of dis-identification (Hodges, 1998)); and
3. "blow outs" that indicate the potential escalation of negative behaviours.

These stages are the precursors to more outward forms of Internet related bullying, which Baruch (2005) found to occur at approximately the same rate as other modes of communication and with the same outcomes.

The use of the send all in the technical field worker's workplace seems to point to a lack of understanding of the protocols for using electronically mediated communication. There seems to be a lack of recognition that hitting 'send-all' may be akin to shouting in a large room, where not all people want to participate in the shouted conversations and indeed are attempting to conduct their own conversations. These users may not have grasped the nuances in the shift from one form of communication to another, that is, from spoken to electronically mediated communication (compare with Wertsch's (1998) discussion of mediated contexts).

The lack of care highlighted in some cases is cause for concern. For the academic, even with care, the recipient's response was seemingly disproportional and could easily have escalated further. The response from the tutor seemed to step over all boundaries of courteous communication. This seems to suggest that workers need to be more than competent with the technology; they must understand the conventions concerning its use and through which they and others will interact (Ruth, 2005). Each case demonstrates particular ways in which the lack of communicative ability, or misunderstanding the communication process by electronic means, may contribute to an environment where counter-productive behaviours, such as bullying, may occur. All participants demonstrate high levels of literacy of email. Thus there is recognition that more training is required to develop 'functional literacy', particularly with respect to email across the organisation.

### **STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION OF BULLYING BY EMAIL**

This analysis points to some potential strategies to prevent incidences and escalation of counter productive workplace behaviours leading to bullying. In the workplace:

1. Implementation of training in electronic communication;
2. Formalising of outward facing communication and 'official' internal communication, with particular attention to style of communication (addressing the first paradox identified by developing a range of 'form emails' for common business communications) and
3. Employing a range of common anti-bullying strategies which specifically mention mediated communication such as email.

Strategies that can be implemented by individuals include:

1. For sensitive issues: pause, reflect, read, rewrite, send;
2. Likewise, for non-sensitive issues: pause, reflect, read, rewrite, send;

3. Referring inappropriate internal emails to HR training;
4. Carbon Copying others into email where received messages may 'cross the line'; and
5. Recognising differences in ongoing interactions (electronic conversations) and the more formal requirements of business communications (formal communication).

Perhaps a return to slower methods of communication would reduce the incidence of stress-related bullying, however the speed of modern communication almost dictates rapid response without necessary time to reflect on communication style. Discussions around these issues on many blogs (see Purdy, Lifehacker.com 2008) indicate that email communication can expand to fill much of a worker's day. Strategies that are proposed in these forums include:

1. allocating a series of blocks of time specifically for answering email;
2. streamline the processing of email—immediate response, needs more information, longer term request;
3. designing a set of responses for common requests; and
4. designing a set of 'automated' responses for common errors (e.g. openly cc-ing individuals rather than blind cc-ing, including too much information).

Because email is a fluid communication media, that is, it can be used for both formal and informal communication and the line between the two is blurred, attention to how it is used is essential to ensure it is efficiently used in the workplace. For general, broadcast messages, there is a tendency to move towards blogs and wikis for general and/or static information. Blogs have the advantage of being editable and therefore correctable, and not appearing in one's inbox as another message to process. Individuals can therefore access the blog as they are able or use the syndication bookmark (RSS button) to read the titles of posts and decide whether to read. Wikis on the other hand, allow the development of ideas that often take a great many email exchanges to complete. In a single wiki page, the ideas can be developed along with documenting that development. Any reduction in volume of email in one's inbox can potentially lead to stress reduction and more effective communication overall.

All of these strategies develop functional literacy of email for Business Environments. As functional business literacy is a requirement for working within organisations, the appropriate use of email is of paramount importance. The requirement that we use communication channels appropriately needs to be fostered within workplace training.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

As a preliminary study, this research has demonstrated that mediated communication may need particular ways of engaging with colleagues. Specific examples demonstrate that perhaps individuals are not conscious of the impact of the processes that email allows. Boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate ways of interacting are blurred by shifts and nuances of electronic communication. Elaboration of these blurred boundaries and the processes that lead to them may be a fruitful area of research within organisational contexts.

Specific definitions of inappropriate behaviour within mediated contexts in the workplace need to be both elaborated and made public to ensure that the 'secret life' (Grønning, 2005) of email in the organisation becomes more transparent. Embedding email practices in induction processes and ongoing training exercises will likely provide rich research material and potentially lead to more open and appropriate behaviours being exhibited by email users.

## CONCLUSION

Email is a relatively new phenomenon in Business Environments and has much potential to increase communication between individuals. While the benefits are the subject of much research, this paper has highlighted some of the potential ways in which email may lead to counterproductive behaviours among work colleagues. Strategies for both workplace training and for individuals are proposed. The 'secret life' of email points to the need for HR trainers and developers to incorporate 'functional literacy' with specific reference to email use in Business Environments.

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