

The Role of E-mail in Organizational Communication

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Abstract: The present article aims to briefly describe the advantages of the e-mail communication, the constraints of such communication means, as well as a set of rules which should be complied with in order to ensure efficient organizational communication. The fact that communication is such a universal, normal, daily and natural can make us forget sometimes about its particular complexity. Every moment, people communicate with one another, meaning they exchange information, and for this they use various means. Electronic message is an invention which makes our life easier, shatters distances and inhibitions, helps us rediscover and open ourselves to others, casts loneliness away, can bring us closer, but also can set us apart, because it has its rules and traps, of which we should be aware. We consider that nowadays knowing the e-mail related conduit refers to more than simply avoiding long messages written in caps lock, as such can really make a difference between profit and loss. Communication is indispensable, but we should compare and view any information we receive and send with a critical sight.

Keywords: organizational communication, electronic support, digital signature, info-excess, netiquette

Electronic Mail (E-mail)

We live in a “world of communication”, as more and more it is said, and the reasons of communication (to inform, to teach, to influence, to persuade etc.) have amplified to the same extent as the means by which the transfer of information is performed.

Communication is such a natural area in our lives, that many times we forget how much tact and flexibility are necessary while communicating. Communication is an art!

A distinction should be made between communication and communication means. Communication is the specific human

activity, while communication means refers to the tools, techniques, technologies used by communication. Along with the evolution of multi-media computers, the connecting of such to local and public networks, as well as by Internet, the possibility has been created for once separated technologies (telephony, information technology, image processing etc) to be interconnected and for completely new application areas to occur, of the highest importance for institutions. The Internet (a network of networks) has already changed a lot the world of institutions and will continue to do so in the future in an even more radical way. Thus, business transactions and communication processes of companies are more and more performed under new shapes. This has of course consequences on both the companies' organization, as well as for their employees.

The electronic mail service, known mostly under the name of "e-mail" is today the most used Internet service. E-mail occurred and has become as a simple, rapid and cheap electronic communication means. It is due to e-mail that the Internet has evolved so spectacularly. Its great advantage is that the message is sent almost instantaneously by the Internet in any place in the world. If the addressee is not available when the message is sent, then the message remains in his/her Inbox.

Another important facility provided by e-mail is that various types of files can be attached to the messages (text, graphic or sound). When the addressee receives the message, the attachment is delivered as an icon which can be saved on the disk or opened when the message is read. The partial functions of the electronic mail system are: receiving messages, sending messages,

auto-reply message confirming receipt, keeping files and messages, compiling and editing (re-processing) messages to be sent, distributing electronic correspondence, archiving the inbox or sent items. The *carbon copy* (cc) function allows for copies of a message to be sent to one or more persons. A received message can be forwarded to another person in the received form or modified, together with comments.

The economic advantages of electronic mail have been rapidly exploited. Trades worldwide have used electronic mail in their direct marketing campaigns (promoting products by contacting each individual client or potential client), and savings obtained in terms of advertisement budget have been consistent. Shortly an information excess was reached, which was in the disadvantage of addressees the inbox of which became full of undesired messages, there was no more room for the useful ones. In the same time, uncertainty existed regarding the correctness of recording the personal data of the addressees (name, e-mail address, preference for certain products) by traders and regarding the usage of such data.

After e-mail had been for a long time favored by marketing people, they are returning now to direct mail. This is explained by the fact that for marketing and PR managers it is important to know what happens with the sent e-mails. They want to know if such reach their addressees or not, if they are read or not, if their content is interesting to the addressee or not. It is true that lately large companies are paying more and more attention to selecting the right moment and way for selling a product. E-mail can be very efficient, yet direct mail remains the best way of reaching the most various public.

The first and most important component of the e-mail structure is e-mail address. Addresses have the same structure for all Internet users, for instance:

The symbol @ in the middle of the address divides it in two: the name of the user on the left, and the name of the domain, internet service on the right (such domain name is allocated to a certain computer in the Internet network). The Internet network analyses the name of the domain, it finds the number associated with such (the address of the computer sending the mail messages) and it uses the said number to send the message to the right place. Here is an example of e-mail address ittenis@yahoo.com.

Similarities and Differences Compared to Classic Mail and Direct Conversation:

Due to the increased speed and to the possibility of viewing messages on the screen of a computer, e-mail is significantly different from classic letters. It is rather similar to a conversation than to a letter, because the addressee can receive the message rapidly and he/she can also answer quickly. Also, in the case of a classical letter it is important for such to be clear and unambiguous, because the addressee does not have the possibility of requesting clarifications on the spot. By e-mail, however, clarifications can be requested immediately, which makes electronic mail a lot more similar to direct speech. Although it is similar to direct speech, e-mail is not a synonym of such. The lack of vocal inflexions, of gestures, ambiance, makes the communication process less humanly profound as an actual conversation or phone discussion would be. It is for such reasons why electronic mail is different from both classical letters and direct speech.

Similarities with Classic Mail:

- Both in the case of e-mail and in the case of classic mail, an address is necessary;
- The receipt of the message is not guaranteed;
- Communication is not protected (messages can also be read by other people);

The Differences are the Following:

- E-mail is quicker (we can communicate worldwide within only a few seconds);
- It is less expensive (cheaper than sending a mail message and often cheaper than a phone discussion);
- It is more comfortable. User groups can be created, which could allow for a message to be written and then sent to all the persons in that group.

For organizational communication, e-mail represents an excellent way of communicating decisions, of requesting details, sending information to colleagues in other departments of the company, and also to business partners, collaborators. That is why it is necessary for any employee, regardless the area he/she works in to have electronic mail using knowledge. It is increasingly obvious that the world today can no longer live without technology and especially without Internet, and amongst the applications of the Internet the most used one is e-mail. The ever wider using of e-mail also arises from the possibility of verifying it by various means (laptop, PC, phone, etc). We mention a few areas in which electronic mail can be applied in companies: general information for employees (postage board); agreements and current debriefings; informing team members;

coordinating terms; planning and coordinating projects; preparing meetings etc.

The most "convinced" e-mail users are employees. They admit that they check their e-mail a few times a day (some every 5 minutes, and others even more often), that they receive and send numerous messages daily, and that they check their work e-mails even from home. This implies a large number of hours in front of the desktop. Researchers have reached the conclusion that this e-mail addiction is not a beneficial one. Advanced countries such as Japan or China have started to take measures in order to protect people from the damaging effects of the Internet.

Nonetheless, the advantages of using the e-mail in an organizational framework cannot be ignored. A survey performed in America shows that over 80% of the questioned people admitted that by using the e-mail in their daily activity their working capacity had increased, their relations with the co-workers had improved and their job tasks had become easier. This survey demonstrated that those who used e-mail as a means of communicating in business obtained an increased yearly income than those who did not use the new communicational technologies.

In order to improve internal communication, many companies have created a generic e-mail address, so that to help employees to solve some problems. The person behind this address "sees" if the e-mail was sent to the appropriate department and, most important, he/she follows-up on the e-mail's receiving a rapid response.

The increasingly usage of electronic support in the business world calls for the existence of the same feeling of trust and safety from partners as in the case of "classical" businesses. This aspect has been solved by introducing digital signatures.

A digital signature – say IT specialists – provides a higher securitization degree than hand signature, because the addressee of a message which has been signed with a digital signature can verify if the original message belongs to the person the signature of which has been attached and if the message has been modified intentionally or by mistake from the date of its being signed. Moreover, digital signatures cannot be denied, and the person signing the document cannot invoke forgery in order to avoid liability. Although in Romania some reticence exists from managers to use electronic signature, Europeans and Americans are currently using it. This reticence of Romanian managers might also arise from the fact that digital signature does not ensure document confidentiality.

More and more specialists are speaking about "e-mail intelligence", meaning the ability of translating the values of emotional intelligence (self-control, empathy, correct use of relationships) first into e-mail communication principles and then into practical processing techniques. It is unanimously admitted that the e-mail messages represent the image of a company, its "business card" and that they can influence the success or in-success of a business. Although they admit the stake of e-mail messages, many users do not know how to write them, do not know the unwritten politeness code and it is only after having pressed the send button that they realize the consequences. Things are even more severe in the case of communication between persons who come from different cultures. Actually, for those who are not used to write, e-mail can be a painful act, and for those who are used to write, it is a challenge because they need to put into words in a personal style the entire complexity of a face-to-face communication.

The question is: is there a good conduct code for e-mail messages in Romania? It is clear that one cannot speak of efficient and pleasant communication unless for common sense and etiquette.

For the Romanian Internet, compared to the English language based one, the initiative of a set of netiquette rules has only just begun. What should this code contain? Here are some rules:

- Messages should be clear and concise, and grammatically correct. Many times the message writing standard can generate the perception of the clients over the provided products or services;
- Short sentences should be used, simple words, yet with a large impact over the addressee; the messages editing manner can be efficiently customized, including in using salutation line, templates, signatures and others alike, by using the options provided by Microsoft Office Outlook 2003;
- E-mail should be read before sending;
- E-mail is not made for a particular type of humor, sarcasm, irony or criticism;
- Before pressing the send button we should ask ourselves "Would I want to receive this sort of a message?";
- There should be a double-checking on whether the addressee is the one to whom we want to send the message; when sending an attachment, there should be checked if the file has been attached;
- The company e-mail address should not be used to receive and send "personal" messages.

According to a study published by Ziarul Financiar of November 30, 2005, a

quarter of the corporate e-mails are personals, and 62% of the employees send business e-mails from their personal e-mail accounts. When employees send work related e-mails from their personal e-mail accounts they can subject companies to certain risks. Although the reasons for which they do such things might be harmless, companies cannot monitor this sort of e-mail messages, and it is possible for employees to send commercial secrets outside the company.

There is no strict regulation in our country regarding the use of e-mail. In many companies, the employees have the right of using the Internet, of sending personal (private) e-mails from their job, under the condition of not making abuses. In France, for instance, *Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés* establishes some conditions: the duration of using, it forbids access to pornographic websites, and personal messages should be saved in a personal file with the name "private" etc. The start moment and limit of using the e-mail, as well as the Internet access are regulated by internal regulation, which is viewed as official document. Breach of this regulation can be sanctioned by losing the user rights or even end of license:

- e-mail should not be used for sending strictly confidential information (for this purpose the phone discussions or face-to-face meetings are preferred), as such information could reach bad-willing persons;
- messages should not be written when one is angry, as an e-mail sent by a furious person is impolite and could affect one's career; we should wait for 24 hours before pressing the send button (after replacing the angry message with a professional one);

- messages should not be written in caps lock (as messages written only in caps lock are difficult to read and can be interpreted as a call for help);
- messages should not have attachments that are too large;
- abbreviations should not be used excessively, and those that are used should be known by the addressee;
- unsolicited messages should not be sent;
- no icons should be used in business messages;
- messages should be signed, even if our address is visible to the addressee;
- messages received from unknown persons should not be forwarded (they could have viruses);
- e-mail should not be used in order to express condolence or sympathy to someone;
- salutation and closing lines should not be omitted, and such can be formal or not depending on the addressee;
- familiar first name based addressing should not be used, unless the addressee has allowed for such or if he is known to the sender;
- the subject should be carefully decided; a message with the title Hello or Read this will not be read immediately, while a message with the title "Message from the accountancy" will become a priority;
- e-mails should be as simple as possible; the numerous formatting possibilities provided by the computer should not be abused;
- e-mail should not be used when the sender does not have the courage of communicating face-to-face with a

person (some employees ask for a salary raise, bonuses or send their resignation form by e-mail);

- when sending an invitation to an event by using the e-mail, the addressee should be referred directly; if the same invitation is sent to more than one person, carbon copy or blind carbon copy should not be used, as this would be an impoliteness, especially in the business world.

We think it is essential to know and respect some etiquette rules in writing e-mails, and that this means more than simply avoiding long messages or caps lock writing. This could make a difference between profit and lose. A company's image can be severely damaged by incorrect messages and then why invest in products promotion or advertising?

If managers and employees have admitted the importance and also the dependency on e-mail in organizational communication, a recent survey has demonstrated that young people have already started to view it as outdated, as the first place is now taken by SMS, which are far more rapid, allow for immediate feedback, there is no need for a particular location in order to send an e-mail; also, the reply time and intimacy play an important role, as they say.

But is e-mail an already outdated communication tool? Will SMS, blogs, socializing networks defeat electronic mail? In countries such as Japan, South Korea and even in Romania young people are following a global trend, a fashion movement. And while fashion exists in any area, is it possible for a comeback of electronic mail on the leading position it has a few years ago?

It is true that many companies use the e-mail as an internal communication means

due to the rapidness and ease by which it can be used, but in the case of employees who do not have Internet access, other communication means can also be used: face-to-face meetings, group meetings, internal magazines and publications, closed network television, postage boards. Each manager should know what communication means best fits the company he/she manages, by considering the resources of that company, and not what is fashionable or not.

E-mail – a Stress Source for Employees?

While 10-15 years ago e-mail was viewed as an extraordinary outbreak, it has become a stress source for employees. Is it a necessary evil? According to some surveys, many suffer from stress caused by the large number of work messages. Most times, employees who are addicted to computers reach desperation when they notice at the end of their working schedule that because of the large number of e-mails they had to read or write, they have done far less than they had aimed for that day.

After sending an e-mail control is lost over the effects that message will generate and it becomes a stress source to wait for the message. In case the answer is delayed, we ask ourselves what happens: either the e-mail has not reached destination, or the addressee is not interested by the content of the message, as well as we do not know what answer we might receive, if any. The time is passing and messages turn business schedule upside down, and the patience and tolerance of the employees are becoming almost inexistent. This waiting time can induce the feeling to the employees that they are not productive enough or good enough on their jobs.

Also, specialists have proven that out of every five e-mail messages we receive, three call for an answer, and this means that for every five e-mail message one sends one receives at least three other in return. People receive a lot of information, much without any value, and that is how e-mails keep piling in; one should learn how to ignore those without any value and to manage the useful ones. Against info-excess there should be considered: to reduce the volume of e-mails, which means less messages to store; to improve their quality; to train others on sending efficient e-mails; to bookmark and rapidly find information; to use a highly efficient virtual folder system (by this avoiding the overloading of the Inbox folder). There has been demonstrated in practice that an important connection exists between the efficiency of the e-mails and the way in which information is stored.

In the book *Revolutia hamsterilor: Cum sa va gestionati mesajele de e-mail inainte ca ele sa va gestioneze*, authors Mike Song, Vicki Hasley and Tim Burrell suggest that in order to make the e-mail more efficient a series of questions should be asked: **Is e-mail necessary?** Does the addressee really need our e-mail in order to solve his/her job tasks? Here are some useless e-mails: the *FYI message – For Your Information*. Such messages, say the authors, are sent under the idea that sometimes some colleague might need that information, which is stored without being read. Also, thank you messages for routine tasks become annoying for many business people; **Is it Adequate?** (appropriate, professional, harmless? We know that e-mails are property of companies and that they should comply with the internal regulation and in force legislation); **Is it correctly distributed?** (If the

message is sent to an appropriate number of addressees by the best channel). Precise distribution is the most efficient way of reducing the time dedicated to e-mail messages, which implies reducing the use of *Reply-to-all*, *CC – Carbon copy* and *distribution lists*. If one carefully considers these questions and correctly answer to them, then results will soon be visible.

In conclusion, there can be said that electronic support provides employees, communication and marketing managers numerous advantages, yet incorrect and inefficient use due to unknowing minimum rules can lead

to loses that are difficult to measure both in terms of the company's image, and of the sale of products or services. Today messages occupy almost a quarter of the work day of a regular specialist and this is why in order to ensure time management and professional success he/she should have a strategy for e-mail messages management. *Productivity of the informational work will become the economic challenge for the information society. On it will the competitive position of any country, of any activity area and of any institution in the society depend (Peter Drucker).*

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