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A simple approach to improving email communication: going back to basics

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A Simple Approach to Improving Email Communication

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GOING BACK TO BASICS

Email communication is becoming a burden for many employees and the way email is handled is far from efficient [5]. Employees are overwhelmed by the volume [4], lose important items [6], and feel pressured to respond quickly (often within seconds [3]). The major research in this field is trying to solve these problems by designing and building better email systems through understanding email usage [5]. Although these systems will probably improve email communication, would going back to basics provide, at worst, an interim solution?

It would be a fair assumption that the end-user of an email application is the major source of the problem, as they create and receive the email that periodically causes the problems. The back to basics approach is based around identifying the major problems users face with email and then administering training on how to become a more effective email communicator. Although the approach sounds simple and has successfully been applied to many other problem areas, will it work for email communication?

STAGE 1 – IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEMS

The first stage of the study involved developing and deploying a questionnaire to all staff who use email to capture employees' views on how email was used within their organisation (a large UK Plc with 2,850 email users). To give the employees added security that their individual responses would not be disclosed to the management at the organisation, the questionnaire was securely hosted on a remote server.

The questionnaire was designed to highlight any inefficiencies or defects in the way that email is used. It asked employees to specify how many emails they received on average each day and what proportions of these were irrelevant or unnecessary. Employees also answered questions that related to how they viewed email use within the organisation.

STAGE 2 – CREATE SPECIFIC TRAINING

The second stage of the study involved analysing the data captured from the questionnaire (875 responses) and creating an email defects training programme specific to the large UK Plc. The main findings from the questionnaire are:

- 16% of emails received were copied in unnecessarily
- 13% of emails received were irrelevant or untargeted
- 41% of emails received were information purposes
- 46% of actionable emails received stated what action is expected
- 56% of employees agreed email is used too often instead of phone or face-to-face
- 45% of employees say their emails are easy to read

To assess the extent, if any, the training programme would have on the organisation, a sender recipient study was undertaken. Both sender and recipient groups (11 employees and 20 employees respectively) received different training on the best practice of email use. The sender training was more comprehensive than the recipient as the recipient only required a basic knowledge of the email defects so to complete an evaluation sheet per email received. The sender training explained the negative effects of email defects and the sessions were interactive with the participants having to highlight the defects of poorly written emails. The training sessions targeted the following areas for optimisation:

- Is an email necessary?
- Targeting your email
- Use an effective subject line
- Getting your message across
- Sending attachments
- Managing your Inbox

All recipients were asked to mark up to 20 emails they received from the sender before and after the sender had received training on the best practice of email use. The recipients marked each email against a set of criteria, giving a score depending on how well the email met each criterion. The scores both before and after the training were averaged for each sender and recipient pair. The chosen pairs for the experiment were based on high volume email senders with a recipient that was likely to receive a high number of sender's emails during the two-week monitoring process (two weeks before and after training).

DOES GOING BACK TO BASICS WORK?

T-test analysis showed that there was an improvement in the quality of emails received by the recipients as a result of email training for the senders. Email training also had a significant impact on the following areas:

- (99% significant) better use of the subject line which makes it easier to prioritise an email and also to assess the content.
- (95% significant) better written emails which were easier to read and to the point.

- On average it takes less time (10 seconds) to read and understand an email as a result of the training.

IS THERE A FINANCIAL BENEFIT?

To determine any financial savings due to the training, the cost of reading email has to be determined. Building on previous work by Jackson into the cost of reading business and non-business email, a cost of reading email formula was constructed [2]. Using the data obtained from the questionnaire, on average, employees received 23 emails per day and it takes approximately 76 seconds to read each message. Employees therefore spend on average 29 minutes per day reading email. In addition to the 29 minutes there is also an interrupt recovery time associated with email which is reported to be 64 seconds per email [3]. Assuming an average salary of £16,640 (amounts given in UK pounds) per annum and an assumed overhead of a further £16,640 per year, the total cost per day of reading email for an organisation can be calculated using Formula 1 (assuming each email is read and each email has an interrupt recovery time):

$$\text{Cost of reading email} = (t_1 + t_2) * w * n$$

Formula 1 – Cost of reading email

Where t_1 is the time taken to read all messages received (minutes)

t_2 is the total interrupt recovery time (minutes)

w is the average employee wage per minute

n is the number of employees within the organisation.

The daily cost of reading email for this UK Plc with 2850 email-users is £40,848 and the cost per year over £9.8million (based on 48 weeks a year).

The results from the sender and recipient study, after training, show that the UK Plc (2850 email-users) could save £3,071 per day and almost £737,000 per year on time spent reading email as a result of the training. This is an **8%** saving on the total cost of reading email and equates to £259 per employee per annum.

TARGETING FURTHER EMAIL SAVINGS

As already mentioned, on average 29% of the email that an employee receives is of no value to them. Assuming that all these emails are read and the employees have not received email training, an organisation could further reduce the time employees spend reading email. For this UK Plc it would equate to almost £12,000 per day and over £2.8million per year.

With the majority of email applications set to check for new email every 5 minutes, employees can become more efficient if they change the duration of when their email application checks for new email [3] resulting in a further saving. Time saved per email-user as a result of increasing the duration of checking for new email from 5 to 45 minutes is 13.16 minutes per day. This could save this UK Plc £10,000 per day. The savings that can be made through the introduction of training, reducing no-value email and interrupt recovery time are detailed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

CONCLUSION

Our research has shown that going back to basics has increased email efficiency and at worst financially saved this UK Plc 8% on the total cost of reading email. Although the results are specific to this large UK Plc, the study indicates how an organisation can become more effective, by reducing the cost associated with email use through simple email training. The implication for managers in other organizations is that if their own employees respond to training in the same way, they would also benefit from an increase in employee productivity.

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