Faculty Preferences for Communications Channels

Rolando Pena-Sanchez
Texas A&M International University, USA

Richard C. Hicks
Texas A&M International University, USA

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, there are two distinctly different means of communication. The first is group communication, which normally takes place in the classroom. Most of the communication in the classroom uses the face-to-face media. Outside of the classroom, however, various communications media may be used. In this article, we examine the preferences for face to face, e-mail, and telephonic communication for a variety of tasks.

Traditionally, communication outside of the classroom has been accomplished through face-to-face communication, usually in the form of office hours. Virtually all faculty at the college level hold scheduled office hours, which may be supplemented by appointments. In addition, the widespread availability of computers and e-mail has had a significant impact on the communication between faculty and students.

As Marcus (1994) explains, there are two basic streams of research into communication channels. The first stream, as exemplified by the research of Daft and Lengel (1986) and others, focuses on the communication channel. The second perspective focuses on the social context of the communication (Fulk, Stienfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987).

Outside of these two streams, other factors are considered. In a study of managers and executives, Carlson determined that executives selected communications media either by the ease of use or by the richness or social presence of the media (Carlson & Davis, 1998). In other research, Gefen and Straub found that women perceived e-mail as richer (Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987) than their male counterparts (Gefen & Straub, 1997).

Most studies of communications channels focus on the preference of the sender of the communication instead of the receiver (Sifkin, 1992). In faculty-to-student personal communications, as in the selection of channels of employees to management, the selection of a communication channel is usually made by the senders of communication. However, the faculty (and management) have a significant input to the selection process because of the difference in status. It is hoped that this research will widen the current body of communication research and can be generalized to the relationship between managers and employees found in business.

When considering the choice of a communications channel, three factors that must be evaluated are the richness of the communication channel, the immediacy of the channel, and the social context of the task to be performed by the communication. We will next consider these factors.

Richness of Communications Channels

Face-to-face communication is considered to be the richest of these communication channels. As face-to-face communication uses all of the senses, gives immediate feedback, and is more spontaneous, it is the richest of these communication channels (Durlak, 1987). In addition to words, communication is performed by facial expression, body language, and clothes. The expression of humor and sarcasm are far easier to convey in face-to-face communication.

Telephone communication is the next richest of the communication channels studied. Besides words, communication is enhanced by the inflection of the speaker's voice. Humor and sarcasm are less apparent but are still perceivable.

E-mail filters out all but verbal clues to meaning (Karahanna & Straub, 1999). E-mail communication is limited to words, so it is the least rich of the studied communication channels. Words are the predominate means of communication. Emoticons may be used to

indicate emotional components, such as humor, but with less richness than the spoken word.

Immediacy of Communications Channels

Both face-to-face and telephone channels receive immediate responses after they have been initiated because of their synchronous nature. However, this assumes that the communication has been successfully initiated. A student has to wait until the scheduled opportunity (usually office hours) to initiate the communication. Often, this requires a wait of several days.

E-mail is asynchronous because of its unscheduled nature. The student first sends the e-mail, and then waits until the faculty member receives the communication and responds. The waiting period may be from seconds to days, depending on the circumstances. On the other hand, e-mail is not bound by geographical constraints, so a student and faculty member may be in different countries and have rapid communication.

Privacy of e-mail communications may be problematic (Clyde, 1999), especially when traveling. The perception that the university may read a faculty members e-mail was reported by as many of 50% of the faculty members in one survey (Beheruz, Barnes, Burst, & Kaye, 1999).

Social Context of Communications Tasks

Selection of a communication channel has many components. As many types of communication take place between faculty and students, different channels may be selected for different types of communication. Social information processing takes the position that the individual's social environment impacts on the selection of communications channels (Karahanna & Straub, 1999). Some of the characteristics of this task are imparting the feeling of group membership, representing diversity of viewpoints, and providing information that can be passed to others. Social presence indicates the degree to which a channel simulates face-to-face communication (Durlak, 1987). Cost minimization is determined by three factors: access, errors, and delays (Reinsch & Beswick, 1990). Effort costs can be associated with the distance between the two parties (Trevino et al., 1987), familiarity with the channel (Steinfeld, 1987) and length and complexity of the message (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

In a 2000 survey, Johnson et al. classified the choice of communications media by the following tasks: social presence, uncertainty reduction, appraisal, social information processing, decision making, and cost reduction (Johnson 2000). They measured the perceived value of written, interpersonal, and e-mail for these tasks. We will contrast our results with Johnson's in the discussion portion of the article.

In the next section, we will examine faculty—student communication and develop hypotheses about the impact of communications channel choice on the various components of these communications.

FACULTY-STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Timeliness is an important component of any communication. In this environment, it must be recognized that students do not have unfettered access to faculty. Many faculty members are available to students only during scheduled office hours. However, many faculty members will answer e-mail outside of office hours.

- H_1: E-mail will be considered as the most timely communication channel.

The accuracy of the communication is of paramount concern. In face-to-face communication, the richness of the channel offers more clues as to the meaning conveyed. However, no documentation of the conversation is created except for when the student takes notes. E-mail is inherently self-documenting.

- H_2: E-mail will be considered as the most accurate communications channel.

The convenience of the communications channel is important to both parties. It may be very difficult for the student to be present during office hours because of work or other classes. It is not always possible to make alternative arrangements for face-to-face or telephone communication. E-mail may be received or sent in an asynchronous manner without a prearranged meeting time and place.

- H_3: E-mail will be considered the most convenient communications channel.

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