

Improving Corporate E-mail Communications with Employees at Remote Locations: A Quantitative Study in Progress

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INTRODUCTION

Today's company managers are under pressure to manage employees residing in different cities, states and countries, and are pressured to adapt to the changing definition of the workplace. Mayor (2001) describes the traditional 9:00-5:00, one office location, as archaic; advocates for having employees at remote locations; and advises managers to learn to effectively communicate without the luxury of in-person or face-to-face interaction. Companies are setting up remote offices so employees or telecommuters can work from or near home, are physically close to clients, and to cross boundaries of time, distance, culture, and geography. Melcrum (2000) wrote that the increase in the number of remote locations accommodates work/life balance of teleworkers by reducing travel and time away from home, and is supported and enabled by technological advancements such as computers, the world wide web, video conferencing, cellular phones, pocket-size computers, wi-fi, and electronic mail (email) - the predominant communication channel of teleworkers and the topic of this quantitative research project.

If Janove (2006) and Enemark (2006) are correct - knowledge, trust, and connectedness are critical to managing offsite employees, and a common success denominator of the three elements is effective communication, which has distinct performance challenges. Kuzma (2006) wrote that a prominent issue for companies managing teleworkers is the pervasive use of email and its associated communication problems. Enemark (2006), Kuzma, (2006), and Suler (1997) agree that the absence of verbal and non-verbal communication signals, present in face-to-face and telephone interactions, can lead to misconstrued email tones or meanings, miscommunications, disorientation, and lingering bad feelings. "While email may indeed smooth the load to some degree, it also carries a big potential for misunderstanding. The problem, however, is not email but communication skills. Employees who cannot communicate, whether orally or in writing, are less effective" (Gibbs, 1998, p.1). But managers of teleworkers in virtual communities often defer to this most popular corporate communication channel of email and therefore need tools to enhance the effectiveness of email communications.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Email is a dominating corporate communication channel, replacing even the telephone (PcPheat, 2002). Email is an invasive, technological phenomenon that should be used proficiently. It can build or destroy relationships, and has the legal power of the printed word which cannot be taken back once the send button is pushed. Resources for writing effective emails are abundant but are limited in focus to netiquette, content, format, and proper/legal use. Interpersonal communication experts advise on the art of communication but the advice is written for face-to-face or phone interactions rather than for email interactions. Decker (1996), Hunsaker (2005) and others have written at length regarding the need for managers to build trust and relationships with employees by actively listening and sending encouraging verbal and nonverbal communication signals through the use of behavioral skills like appropriate eye contact, open posture, suitable facial expression, encouraging gestures, verbal prompts - all present in synchronous interactions but all nonexistent in an environment dependant on asynchronous interactions like email. "The inability to develop personal rapport over e-mail makes relationships fragile in the

face of conflict" (Enemark, 2006, p.1). Seeley and Hargreaves (2003) wrote that email is the "DNA of communications," (p. 4) and that some managers receive an average of 68 emails a day. Managers need performance enhancing tools and techniques to act as surrogates for email's missing verbal and nonverbal signals to help build trust and relationships with telecommuters and offsite employees, and to enhance productivity and profitability.

Business communicators know that one way to improve communications is to first study and understand the various styles of communication (Wilson, 2004). Once the communication style of a client or employee is determined, then managers who have been trained to use the skill of adapting behaviors to mirror those of others can effectively learn to communicate in the native styles of a client or an employee (Alessandra & O'Connor, 1996). Managers who understand style differences and then learn to adapt to the styles of others benefit greatly and help reduce communication barriers and misunderstandings (Hunsaker, 2005), but these critical skills relate to face-to-face interactions. And an online poll of 1,013 Canadians conducted in the spring of 2006 revealed that face-to-face conversations account for 38% of daily interactions and are closely followed by email exchanges at 30% of interactions (mobile telephones account for 12%, and home telephones about 20%) which illustrates the need to develop tools and techniques for maximizing the effectiveness of email exchanges (Canadian Newswire, 2006).

Additionally, it is estimated that there are over eight million teleworkers in the United States and that the most popular channel of communication of these individuals is email. There are intrinsic problems with understanding the tone of email exchanges, recipients correctly interrupt emails only about 50% of the time, often leading to misunderstandings, ill will, flame wars, and a lack of trust and connectedness - all of which negatively impact production and profit. Enemark (2006) wrote of a study conducted by Kruger and Epley in 2005 that proved a link between email misunderstandings and egocentrism, meaning, that people tend to write and interpret emails solely from a single perspective and assume that email receivers understand exactly what the senders intended. Enemark (2006) further described the findings of this study to include the confirmation that the lack of verbal and nonverbal cues is a problem with emails; and that because emails are quickly transmitted and informal they imitate face-to-face interactions but are missing the critical paralinguistic signals of the spoken word. Jourdain (2002) reminds that only seven percent of a message interpretation is based on the actual written or spoken words and that the remainder of the message is subject to the receiver's filters. The Kruger and Epley research found in five separate studies that email senders believe they clearly communicate 78% of the time; that email recipients believe they properly interpret emails 89% of the time; and, in reality, the receiver only correctly interprets email 56% of the time, indicating room for miscommunication (Enemark, 2006). "To avoid miscommunication, e-mailers need to look at what they write from the recipient's perspective, Epley says" (Enemark, 2006, p.1).

RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Communication suffuses most everything in life therefore any and all improvements to communication process effectiveness is beneficial (Jackson, Dawson,

& Wilson, 2002). Identifying and adapting face-to-face communication styles is a process for improving communication effectiveness that is not new; it has been taught and successfully used in corporations for over 45 years (TRACOM Group, 2004), was created as a way to understand the perspective of message recipients and to demonstrate respect. What *is* new is the concept of applying the identification and adapting techniques to email interactions to determine email styles or e-styles. Before a technique or model for adapting e-styles can be developed, the hypotheses that e-styles exist, are predictable, and correlate to face-to-face styles must be researched. The researcher will work to prove or disprove the theory that communication styles manifest not just during face-to-face interactions but also in email communications.

The TRACOM SOCIAL STYLES ModelSM is based on the premises that there is no communication style better than another; there are four basic styles – analytical, amiable, driving, and expressive; styles are identified by analyzing physical and verbal behaviors that are measured on two axes or continua of assertiveness and emotiveness; and that the key to using this information to improve communications is in the ability of the person transmitting the message to style-adapt to the person receiving the message.

First is style identification and second is style adaptation. Benefits of adapting include learning to speak in a client's or employee's style language which will increase comfort, help make a difficult message palatable, and emphasize the content of the message rather than the delivery style of the message. Focus will remain on the message content and reduce misunderstandings or misconstrued negative feelings, attributable to style differences, which the manager may have unintentionally communicated to the employee.

The TRACOM Corporation's SOCIAL STYLESM MODEL has well documented evidence of four basic communication styles and of the effectiveness of adapting. TRACOM has a tested and proven methodology for identifying styles by analyzing specific physical and verbal behavioral patterns such as eye contact, speech, and body movement (TRACOM Corporation, 2001). TRACOM places specific behaviors on two continua. One continuum is described by behaviors that determine a person's amount of Tell/Ask assertiveness or level of influence. About half the population is more tell-assertive, the other half is more ask-assertive (Bolton and Bolton, 1996). Driving style and expressive style are the two styles considered tell-assertive and analytical style and amiable style are ask-assertive (TRACOM Corporation, 2004). TRACOM's model determines assertiveness by analyzing specific behaviors.

The second continuum is described by behaviors that determine a person's amount of responsiveness or levels of evident emotion and are called Emote/Control responsive. About half the population is more emotionally controlled and the other half is less emotionally controlled and both are determined by examining levels of obvious displays of emotion and attention to people versus attention to numbers and statistics (Bolton & Bolton, 1996). Driving and analytical are the two styles considered more emotionally controlled, and expressive and amiable

styles are less emotionally controlled. TRACOM determines emotiveness also by analyzing specific behaviors.

The styles are then determined when the two continua are combined to form a quadrant with assertiveness on the horizontal axis and emotiveness on the vertical axis. People who are tell-assertive and more emotionally controlled are driving style. People who are tell-assertive and less emotionally controlled are the expressive style. People who are ask-assertive and less emotionally controlled are the analytical style, and people who are ask-assertive and more emotionally controlled are the amiable style. TRACOM's objective approach to analyzing behaviors for determining styles is captured in Figure 1 on a quadrant. The lines with the arrows are the continua and the combination of assertiveness and emotive behaviors when placed on the quadrant indicate style.

During this study a similar diagnostic tool using two continua and a quadrant will be created to capture and analyze the email writing behaviors that would define e-styles. The researcher will model the styles descriptors and the identification after TRACOM's SSP system but proposes the following titles for the four e-styles. The researcher's e-styles and TRACOM's in-person styles names are, respectively (a) logical/analytical, (b) supportive/amiable, (c) straightforward/driving style, and (d) communicative/expressive. Diagnosing styles is the first step to improving interpersonal communications and regardless of what the names of the styles are, once an employee's style is determined it is advisable for managers to take the second step and adapt behaviors in a way that emulates that of the employee's style. Adapting will result in fewer misunderstandings and encourage trust and open communication. The adapting technique is important to use for a variety of reasons including increasing the employee's receptivity to hearing a difficult or complicated message. But before adapting e-styles, comes analyzing and identifying e-styles, which is the focus of this study.

By proving the hypothesis that e-styles exist could result in the creation of a training solution for managers to: (a) identify e-styles; (b) craft effective emails by adapting to the e-style of others; (c) increase the recipient's understanding; and (d) decrease the potential for miscommunication. Second, the creation of e-styles predictor software has important applicability to corporations managing remotely. Additionally, if the research provides evidence that e-styles and in-person styles correlate, then the theories and practices regarding in-person styles identification can be applied to e-style identification. Managers who understand and value the premise of identifying in-person communication styles of employees may also see a value for identifying e-styles of employees however; research has not been conducted on predicting e-styles.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

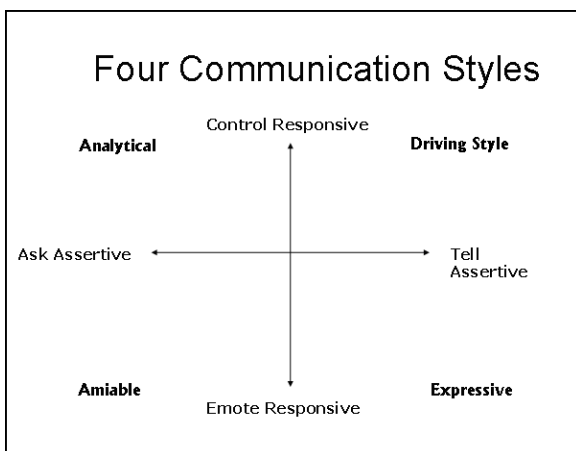
The purpose of this study is to develop a tool to test the theory that e-styles exist, can be identified, and correlate to in-person styles. Once proven, training will be developed to instruct managers how to adapt to the e-styles of others. The research will require the development of a software model designed to analyze email characteristics and to identify data trends that can be categorized as e-styles. The characteristics are derived based on behavioral criteria similar to those used by the TRACOM SOCIAL STYLES ModelSM. The researcher will analyze approximately 2,000 emails collected from 100 eligible participants and, to explore a second hypothesis, correlate the data with data collected on the participant's in-person styles. If the study proves the hypothesis that e-styles correlate to in-person styles then the literature and practices of in-person communication styles theories will apply to e-styles.

Two hypotheses have been formulated for this study. The first hypothesis is that e-styles can be predicted by analyzing email correspondence. The researcher will study email characteristics, or predictors, to identify trends in levels of emotiveness and assertiveness which when placed on continua indicate the writer's e-style. The second hypothesis is that e-styles correlate to in-person communication styles. If the second hypothesis is true then theories, research, practices, and literature on in-person styles can be applied to e-styles.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The information gained during this quantitative research study will test the hypothesis that e-styles of employees can be determined by examining specific email characteristics that when placed on two continua describe how best to understand an employee's written e-style. Similarities and differences may surface during this study between email and in-person communication characteristics used to predict

Figure 1. The four communication styles quadrant



the styles which will disprove or prove a correlation between the two. Information from this research study will provide new communication improvement resources for management to use in developing and improving relationships with employees at remote locations. Additionally it is expected that participation of 100 will be achieved because managers are interested in learning about communication styles and will be interested in receiving a free style profile assessment.

The study described is designed to test the hypotheses by (a) studying about 2,000 emails from about 100 participants to determine email communication style indicators; (b) by identifying participant's in-person communication styles, using the TRACOM SSP-E online profile method; and (c) by comparing e-Com styles with the in-person profile results to see if there is a correlation. The results of the study will be compiled into and communicated through a manager's training curriculum. The training will be designed to be used as a strategic internal communications plan component, will link improved email communication skills to corporate business operations initiatives, and may be a viable HPI training solution.

The researcher will use data mining and conduct a neural networks regression analysis driven by R-Software of which the predictors or independent variables are email characteristics and the response variables or the dependant variables are the 2,000 emails submitted by the participants. The characteristics will be reviewed and parameters extracted using a C++ language program developed by a data analyst for this project. The parameters will then be fed into R-Software which is the user interface for running the neural networks. Neural networks is a computational information processing model that will be trained, by using the TRACOM model as a basis, on what the appropriate relations between email attributes and e-styles are and will determine the probability that a set of emails

comes from a person having a particular e-style. If a model that can relate email attributes to in-person styles can be built then e-styles exist. The e-styles will be categorized as communicative, logical, supportive or straightforward. The researcher's theory regarding e-style identification is that managers with communicative styles will issue more directives and make fewer requests and will refer more to feelings. Managers of the logical style make more requests, issue fewer directives and will refer more to facts. Managers who email in the supportive style will make more requests, issue fewer directives and refer more to feelings; and managers of the straightforward style will issue more directives rather than making requests, and will refer more to facts.

CONCLUSION

Improved email communications with employees at remote locations translates to improved relations, trust, productivity, and ultimately profitability. The development of an e-styles identification tool and training curriculum are timely, would offer companies a new HPI training solution for improving the performance of managers and others, and would be a viable component of a corporate internal communications strategy. The ability to identify e-styles will provide guidance to managers seeking a technique to write emails that are non-inflammatory, correctly interpreted, and that successfully and professionally disseminate information to peers, subordinates, supervisors, and clients of different styles. Given the importance of effective communication with clients, employees and others, and the fact that many companies have gone global and need tools and techniques to effectively communicate via email the timing and importance of this study are appropriate.

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