Chapter 14

# Ethical Issues Arising from the Usage of Electronic Communications in the Workplace

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## ABSTRACT

*E-mail has become the most popular communication tool in the professional environment. Electronic communications, because of their specific nature, raise a number of ethical issues: e-mail communications are distance, asynchronous, text-based, and interactive computer-mediated communications and allow for storage, retrieval, broadcast and manipulation of messages. These specificities give rise to misunderstanding, misconduct in the absence of the interlocutors, information and mail overload, as well as privacy infringement and misuse of shared computing resources. Inexperience explains some users' unethical behavior. Other forms of unethical behavior find their roots in corporate culture, internal competition and management styles. E-businesses, as early adopters of information and communication technologies, are being particularly exposed to such behaviors, since they rely heavily on electronic communications. They should therefore assess their internal situation and develop and enforce e-mail policies accordingly.*

## INTRODUCTION

The digitization of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the world-wide extension of ICT-based networks, services and applications, and in particular of the Internet and of the World Wide Web, have paved the road and made possible the correlated development of e-business. The web and

the Internet have also changed the way we communicate and interrelate, both in our private sphere and in the office.

During the past decade, according to a survey conducted by Dimension Data, electronic mail (e-mail) has become the most popular communication tool in the professional environment, outpacing fixed and mobile telephony. 96% of the researched organizations declared that they offered access to e-mail in the workplace to their employees, 91%

to a conventional fixed-line telephone line, and 86% to a professional mobile phone. On the user side, 99% of employees declared they were using e-mail professionally, against 80% for fixed-line telephony and 76% for mobile phone use (Dimension Data, 2007).

Because of the specific nature of e-businesses, as early adopters of ICTs as the underlying infrastructure and tools supporting their business models, the trend towards a heavier usage of computer-mediated communications (CMC) and in particular e-mail is particularly visible in the e-commerce and on-line industry.

There is little doubt that electronic communications, and in particular e-mail, have introduced a paradigm shift in management, organizational and working methods, as well as in business performance, as they have in the economy in general. While ICTs have dramatically improved business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumers (B2C) communications, they have also significantly impacted our day-to-day personal and professional lives. In particular, many organizations and their employees seem to have been overwhelmed by a number of issues arising from the usage of electronic communications in the professional environment.

The adoption of technologies is not morally neutral, and the emergence of the new electronic communication systems has come along with, or has favored, new attitudes and behaviors, giving rise to new ethical concerns. Previous research on ethical issues in e-business mainly addresses the relation of e-businesses to their external environment. Issues such as data mining and profiling, customer and business-critical information protection and privacy, intellectual property rights in a digital economy, or advertizing and spamming, to name but a few, are well covered in the existing literature (Danna & Gandy, 2002; Davenport & Harris 2007; Palmer, 2005; Roman, 2007; Stead & Gilbert, 2001). However, most of the issues explored relate to B2B or B2C relations, or to e-

businesses within their strategic, regulatory and legal environments.

In this chapter, we should take a slightly different perspective as we shall observe business entities *from the inside*. Considering that business ethics and ethical behavior find their roots within the internal corporate culture and practice, this chapter focuses on the ethical issues that arise from the usage of electronic communications in the workplace, and specifically upon the use of e-mail.

Ethical issues are not specific to e-business *per se.* However, e-businesses have specific characteristics, in particular because their model relies heavily on electronic communications, which make them more sensitive to some ethical issues, and in particular to some unethical behaviors. Focusing on interpersonal communication within organizations, this chapter will look at these issues from three different perspectives, e.g. from the managerial, employee, and interpersonal points of view.

The managerial perspective addresses issues such as employee monitoring, private usage of company resources, as well as the implementation of favorable working environments and of pertinent internal policies. The employee perspective encompasses issues such as privacy, autonomy, and mail overload. Finally, the interpersonal perspective covers issues such as the role of e-mail in professional communications, mutual respect (in a team or competitive environment), and misunderstanding in communications. A section of this chapter is also dedicated to the review, definition and description of the most common, although questionable on-line behaviors.

The various behaviors described are also put in context of theory. In particular, three specific avenues are explored: modernity and communication with the "absent other", the right of privacy, and information overload. In this chapter, we will consider e-mail within the theory of modernity (Giddens, 1990), and in particular how the

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