

Doctoral dissertation

Electronic Mail and its Possible Negative Aspects in Organizational Contexts

Abstract

Electronic mail (e-mail) has become the medium of choice in most organizations because of some of its special features. E-mail, like all computer-mediated communication, changes the way we interact and has therefore an impact on working conditions, sometimes in a negative direction. Research findings so far show divergent opinions about how e-mail has influenced work.

The main purpose of this thesis is to understand and explain if and why there are possible negative outcomes of e-mail usage in organizations, and to use the findings to develop a guiding model for organizational e-mail use. The definition of negative outcomes in organizational e-mail communication is defined as everything that prevents or makes it difficult for us, as actors in the organization, to create and regulate our common social reality in order to achieve desirable goals. In order to meet the goals set, earlier research in the area Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) that focus on the effects on the social system was used. This research is mainly based on theories of media choice and communication theories, which offer a valuable contribution for understanding why e-mail might be used in improper ways in organizations. Empirical data was collected in several steps using different techniques, e-mail surveys, face-to-face in-depth interviews, Internet searches, focus groups and a web survey. The target group was managers in different kinds of organizations, but also administrative staff and teachers. The result shows that there are several reasons why e-mail usage might be a problem in organizations like expectations of fast feedback and being constantly updated, post absence backlog, too much information in e-mail, too many incoming e-mails, irrelevant information, decreased personal contact, a more sedentary work environment and e-mail splitting the respondents' time.

The contribution of this thesis is that possible negative aspects of e-mail use in organizations are due to a combination of factors. To overcome any organizational disadvantages of e-mail it is vital to consider the e-mail users' behaviors, feelings and attitudes in a specific organizational context in combination with e-mail's special features. A number of guidelines are presented to help organizations and individuals make e-mail use more efficient and satisfying.

Keywords: E-mail, CMC, miscommunication, negative effects, organizational communication, media choice, communication competence, e-mail competence.