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Electronic Mail: An exploration of the level of use and knowledge of the email facility by Business Studies academic staff at Massey University.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Studies in Human Resource Management at Massey University

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Abstract

Despite the widespread adoption and use of electronic mail in academia we still do not have a clear understanding of how well it is used or how knowledgeable users are of the email systems they use.

In the present study, academic staff members in Business Studies at Massey University completed a questionnaire detailing their use of email in terms of frequency and ability to use sophisticated functions. The effects email has on communication behaviours, including effects on communication participants, content, and process was also investigated as well as the knowledge users had of the Massey University email system in particular, and the general process of communicating electronically.

The sample included 72 respondents (a 47.5% response rate); of which 60% were male, 39% female, and one respondent failed to supply demographic information. The ages of respondents varied, with 29% in the 26-35 category, 38% in the 36-45 category, 32% in the 46-55 category, and 1 respondent was under 26 years old.

The findings show that while the Massey University email facility is used relatively frequently, the level of sophistication in usage was quite low. Several interesting effects on communication were discovered; typically email provided a potential to communicate with a wider pool of people, although such potential is undermined by colleagues not having the facility, not using the facility if they do have it, and the difficulty in accessing email addresses. Respondents also recognised the need to alter the process of their communication when choosing to use the electronic medium as opposed to more traditional media.
Generally, respondents had a sound knowledge of the email systems and packages that they used, although they were less able to identify all the facilities they had access to. Respondents had received different forms of written information and/or training on how to use email, and the helpfulness of such support was given mixed ratings.

The present study is one of the few that looks at variation in behaviours and attitudes related to email from academic respondents that range in levels of use, including non-users and those demonstrating excessive levels of use. It shows distinct differences in the efficacy of the medium in academia as opposed to the business environment, and suggests that writers need to stipulate more clearly which setting they are referring to.

The findings of the present study point to a need for more effective user support systems to encourage maximum use of the resource, the introduction of an international email directory, more widespread use of the facility, and the development of standardised norms or etiquette of use.

The present study provided important basic information about the use and understanding of email among academics. It also lays the foundation for a longitudinal study of influences on changes in use and understanding following the implementation of the new email system and support network at Massey University.
Preface

The speed-up of diffusion, the self-reinforcing character of technological advance, by which each forward step facilitates not one but many additional further steps, the intimate link-up between technology and social arrangements - all these create a form of psychological pollution, a seemingly unstoppable acceleration of the pace of life.

(Toffler, 1970, p. 380)
Acknowledgments

At this point the end is in sight, and I can thank all the people who have helped me along the way in their own special ways.

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Believe it or not, I still managed to have a home life, and the encouragement from friends and family was great, especially Mum, Dad, Tina, my Grandparents, and Brett.
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