E-mail Makes *Everything* More Efficient. . .Unfortunately!

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Let's be clear at the outset: The three of us use e-mail dozens of times every day. We are members of a virtual – geographically dispersed – team.   There's no way we could be as productive and efficient as we are without using the nearly miraculous electronic communications technologies. So we're eager to sing e-mail's praises.

But "Unfortunately!" appears in our title. Why? Our consulting work for Grovewell has obliged us to discover and assess the factors that often cause the well-laid plans of global businesspeople to go astray. The guilty factors often concern the *social* side of business, what is coming to be referred to as "social capital." Social capital is "the norms and social relationships embedded in social structures that enable people to coordinate action to achieve desired goals," according to its World Bank definition. E-mail plays a big role in determining the strength of social capital!

Those who've taken a long look at how business actually gets done have concluded that *business happens if, and only if, human beings cooperate to make it happen*. Implied in turn is that those human beings feel a commitment to work and cooperate based on (1) positive working relationships, (2) shared patterns of communication and meaning, and (3) a reasonably high degree of mutual respect and trust.

Unfortunately, all of the above can be undermined surreptitiously and, yes, *very efficiently* by e-mail and other electronic forms of communication.

Two Well Known E-mail Problems

Since e-mail became widespread, two problems have been widely discussed.

Quantity Problems: In the early days, businesspeople quickly began to use e-mail heavily. For some, the volume became overwhelming. Now, though, most of us have stopped CC-ing everyone. Some firms have instituted e-free periods each day. Daringly, a few of us have been strolling over to our neighbor's cubicle to talk. . . .

Self-Revelation Problems: More recently have come concerns about how e-mail affects others' perceptions of the sender. Will we talk more disapprovingly of John or John's boss if the boss fires John via e-mail? And then there's the matter of the archival record. Days before his inauguration, George W. Bush told 42 close friends and family members that he would no longer e-mail them because "I do not want my private conversations looked at by those out to embarrass. . . ."

Recently Recognized E-Mail Problems

We come now to the most recently recognized e-mail problems. These concern intentions and interpretations, nuances of meaning, emotional reactions, mutual respect, cultural values, relationships and trust – in short, about "social capital."

In daily relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, each of us occasionally has interactions that yield misunderstandings of meaning, misinterpreted intentions, diminished commitment, and erosion of trust.   We know from experience that these negative outcomes, which damage social capital, are capable of occurring among people in long-standing face-to-face relationships.

So ask yourself this: Are these negative outcomes *more* or *less* likely to occur when the interacting parties. . .
- are people who meet infrequently or rarely – who are "virtual strangers";
- are guided by different sets of core social and cultural values;
- have varying expectations about business practices and relationships;

- are (in some cases) native speakers of different languages;

- cannot directly perceive each other via touch, taste, smell, vision, or hearing; and

- are communicating *solely* by manipulating approximately 50 *printed* symbols?

Common, Specific Dangers of E-mail

Here are just three of the many ways in which e-mail can undermine social capital.

1. Interpretation of Meaning: Emphasized by researchers is that e-mail's ability to convey meaning is mediated by printed symbols *only*. This is a problem because as each of us grew up – and as our species evolved over millennia – we learned to communicate not only our thoughts but also our intentions and emotional states using a rich repertoire of behaviors, both verbal (words) and nonverbal (voice inflection, silence, gesture, posture, distance, touch, gaze and facial expression, dress and self-decoration, and many others). Experts say that when *all* facets of face-to-face interaction are assessed, the verbal channel carries only about 30% of the information. "Verbal" means solely the words spoken. The verbal channel amounts to a transcript – printed words – that *completely excludes about 70% of the information* that is routinely "sent" and "received" when people are together.

E-mail is a transcript. Totally absent are the subtly nuanced clues that, ordinarily, you would feed into your experience-honed "emotional intelligence" in order to. . .
- accurately interpret the intentions and emotions of the speaker,
- apply your good judgement about personalities and situations, and
- respond in socially and professionally appropriate ways.

That's a *huge handicap* to give yourself when you're dealing with people and problems critical to your firm, your career, and your social standing among peers!

2. Motivation to Act: E-mail is a social leveler. It enables non-authoritarian, highly informal communication because, as a mere transcript, it strips away indicators of rank, prestige, knowledge, experience, gender, age, and so forth. If you're a U.S. native, you may be thinking, "So what's the problem?" But for businesspeople from many other cultures, not being clued in to hierarchy and expertise distinctions is unsettling.

Knowing all the commercial, relational, and situational contexts in which a communication is taking place is vital to them; without this, *their motivation to act is sharply diminished*, with the result that necessary work may remain undone.

The opposite problem is known to occur. Someone senior in rank e-mails a remark interpreted by subordinates to be a directive. So they act or react at once. . .in ways the sender didn't intend. Had they been face-to-face with this senior person, they would have had clues in the nonverbal channels to interpret the remark as a genuine directive. . .*or* as an ironic aside, an expression of exasperation or annoyance, a sarcastic remark, or even a fond hope voiced to the skies.

3. Process of Disagreements: E-mail enables symbols to be exchanged over distances with breathtaking efficiency. . .*and just as swiftly* enables disagreements and conflicts to spiral downward to disaster. This danger, lurking when friends e-mail, is compounded when the e-mailers are virtual strangers.

Communications experts say that, when people who disagree are physically together, social norms governing discord inhibit overt verbal expressions of disparagement and outrage. Furthermore, when face-to-face, people are able to assess each other's degree of annoyance very largely through the nonverbal channels. This changes radically when we disagree via e-mail. Absent completely is instantaneous nonverbal feedback regarding the other person's intentions and emotions. For example, a desire by one person to appear conciliatory, indicated nonverbally by a facial expression, a tone of voice, or a slump of the shoulders, can't be noticed by the other person. One of two things often occurs. On the one hand, if there's a flurry of back-and-forth messages, the disagreement may quickly spiral downward. On the other hand, if the exchanges are suspended for any reason, there's a tendency for each party to "stew" and imagine the matter to be worse than it actually may be.

The Consensus on E-mail

Everyone who's looked dispassionately at e-mail has concluded that, *by itself*, it's seriously lacking as a means to establish and maintain warm relationships, negotiate

critical deals, make vital decisions, discuss contentious issues, mend wounded egos, build responsive networks, issue stern reprimands, conduct performance reviews, express regret, mentor subordinates, or perform the many other emotion-rich communicative acts that become necessary in the course of attending to business.

Well, then. . .what's e-mail good for?

It's incredibly good for transmitting data and information of all kinds *that have no, or extremely little, emotional content and potential impact on social capital*. Never fear: If we limit it to only this use, we'll all still use it literally dozens of times every day.

Still, every day we need to coordinate the work of, and collaborate with, many others in our virtual working groups. These are people who not only are distant from each other but also have differing personalities and emotions, divergent cultures and values, and a variety of thought and behavioral patterns. *How can we be productive members of virtual teams while side-stepping e-mail's dangers to social capital?*

The answer lies in the development of "e-mail protocols." This will be the subject of our second article in this series [click here], in your next issue of SAMA's *Velocity*.

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