

THE REFORMED USAGE OF EMAIL COMMUNICATION WITHIN AN ODL-UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Virtual Communication is considered the most important tool within an open distant learning university. However, the usage of this kind of communication which is detached from space and time is extremely vulnerable, if the guidelines for users are not clear and the users lack necessary training and experience. As a result, the commitment to make proper use of an excellent technical infrastructure, is questioned to be satisfactory for internal and external customers.

In the first part, this paper chimes into this topic just from the practical implications of communication "theory". It is based on the idea that appropriate customer-oriented communication in ODL must be based upon mutuality, and it outlines typical sources of disturbance.

In the second part, the paper tries to shed light on the analysis of internal usage of email correspondence, which is deemed to be the spearhead of communication for ODL. By the data collected by a pretest survey within different departments the author investigates if the responding rate to others is appropriate to measure up with individual and OUM's communication requirements. It is visible that more than 50% of all emails that required a response were late or the requestor did not receive any response at all. Delays and non-responding at all can set off severe problems for the requestor, even though in many cases the addressee might not be aware of. Furthermore, unsatisfactory response rates may cause misunderstanding or hidden enmities, as a source of frustration follow-ups may not be thoroughly performed and, of course, the requestor cannot settle his or her request appropriately. As a conclusion, it is discussed in how far the emailing correspondence may reflect the overall communication culture within the overall organisation.

In the third part, a catalogue of 10 tailor-made recommendations will be derived how the usage of the internet could be improved. The author furthers ideas how this research could be geared as a catalyst not only for internal communication within ODL, but also serve as a trigger to improve communication with its external customers.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION FOR ADVANCED HIGHER EDUCATION-MANAGEMENT

Communication is anywhere: Even if we do not communicate by oral language, we communicate by having said nothing at all. If others perceive and interpret what we communicate, it turns out that sometimes our intention was a completely different one. The famous sentence of W. I. Thomas will come true: "*If men define a situation as real, it becomes real by its consequences*"¹.

This sentence is of prime value for outstanding reforms in Advanced Higher Education (AHE). In the specific interplay of actual and virtual situations, unreformed communication attitudes can be found in many examples whilst working at a distance learning university: If a tutor would like to apply online, and he or she does not receive any response, undoubtedly this is a matter of unreformed communication, subjected to interpretation. The same counts for the administrator who is at fault pasting and forwarding a student's message to the faculty, but forgets to include the student's name. Especially *virtual* communication within the portals of higher education tends to be both promising and challenging for reforms. If virtual communication works, it may be rational "up-to-the point", and if it's running like clockworks, it seems to be like a permanent pin-ball relationship which may enable individuals and teams to successfully imparting and attaining knowledge². Documentation for research and monitoring purposes is easy, since its flow can be traced back for certain. At the same time, virtual communication tends to be more ambiguous and tricky than the real communication between human beings, since the actual reaction of the recipient remains a blind spot.

For the students as the final users of virtual communications, there are six in part subsequent *roles* to be distinguished for AHE³:

1. Motivation: an individualised, and thereby inspiring working environment will enable the student to perform well and independently from space and time (tele-work)
2. Engaging the Learner: beyond motivation, students can be brought to proactively come up with individual and team-related extra-ordinary online contributions
3. Knowledge Building: as the heart of virtual education, not only providing education material to the students, but the learners can "learn how to learn" in a web-based environment
4. Encourage Higher-Order Thinking: is the summit of AHE, as it enables the learner to do academic work by utilising and stringing together all kind of web resources
5. Collaborative Learning: is a specific kind of learning based upon mutuality between learners among themselves (virtual teamwork by assigned learning groups and permanent work during the semester)

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¹ In Karl Wagner, et al, *Praktische Personalführung*. Gabler: Wiesbaden 2003, p.18.

² W.K.Scheuten, *Neue Kommunikationstechniken und Kommunikation im Betrieb*. In: *Personalführung* 1989, p. 122ff.

³ Karl Wagner, Jaspal Kaur, *Collaborative Learning in ODL*. Paper to be proposed for the International conference Distant Learning, Collaborative and E-Learning. Kuala Lumpur January 2006.

6. Technology Support: entails all the support including work via the e-library, internet platforms, virtual lectures and video-conferencing

THE FOIL FOR AHE-REFORM – COMMUNICATION PROCESS MODEL AND THE EMAIL

Within different actual and virtual channels of AHE, email can be conceived of as a hinge. It is the main general electronic communication tool, since both sender and recipient are deemed to be contactable at any time. This paper clearly just sheds light on the *critical* aspects of this sort of communication: Different expectations of how to use the system, empty or over-flooded in-trays – as far as perception and the definition of situations are concerned. Basically, for the reader's self-study we can figure out five sources of disturbances why email-messages might not come properly across. The following general communication model will demonstrate this idea by the set question marks for the sender:

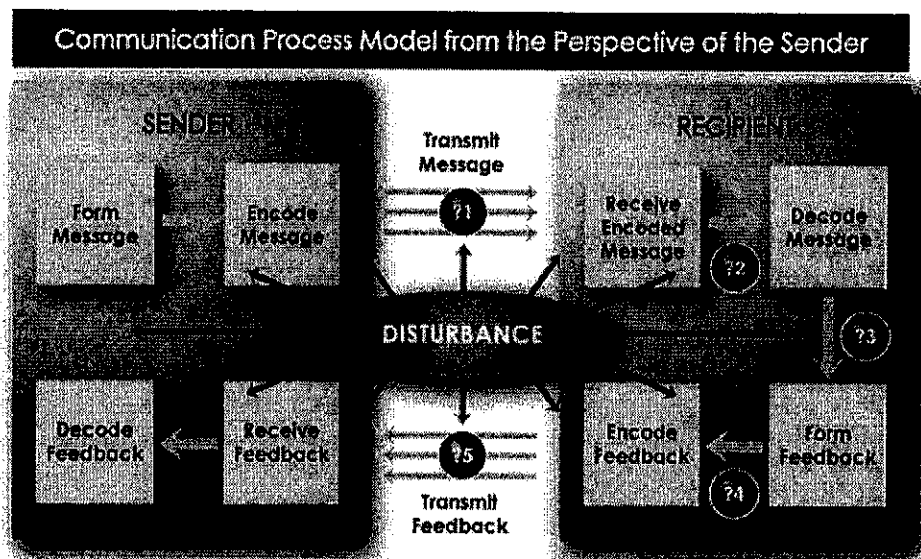


Figure 1: Checklist: Sources of Disturbances in Email-communication

If e.g. the lecturer wants the students to communicate via the AHE-Internet-Forum, he or she might be sometimes surprised if the response rate to the assigned task is not satisfactory and ask what was wrong: Did the message or the response physically not go through (?1 and ?5)? Did the receiver not understand the importance of the message or put different meaning to it (?3, ?4 and ?5)?

In a semi-virtual university like Open University Malaysia (OUM), apart from the dissemination of textbooks an estimated 80 % of all information is being communicated via email or collectively via the Forum. In the following empirical part, we focus solely on email. It is in the limelight of modern e-communication and might be the main source of (mis)understandings for AHE.

PILOT RESEARCH OF THE USAGE OF EMAIL WITHIN OUM

Whereas some studies about the virtual communication of OUM and their students at all have been carried through¹, our pilot research is solely confined to email-communication among the University staff. It is stated that the communication towards the students as the University's external customers can be nourished best, if its own corporate culture sets the tones, the communication with the students can become part of that communication culture as its logical consequence as well (cascade effect). However, before the system will be described in part 3, we have to look at the current status quo to derive suitable impulses. In order to catch the current mood in a nutshell, without deploying too many resources, during the week 10th – 17th June 2005 in two different departments pre-tests with only 10 staff were conducted. In order to get the best mileage ever possible, the sample was clustered into 5 participants from 2 departments with frequent email-contacts, hoping to find out significant similarities and draw suitable conclusions for the whole organisation as one of the leading AHE-providers in South East Asia.

Within the following part, subsequently guided by content of the referring questionnaire in the shaded frames, we will shed light on the main answers that come out of the survey:

¹ Abtar Kaur (2004). The effectiveness of online discussion forum at OUM. Research Paper funded by OUM. Kuala Lumpur: Open University Malaysia. Richard Ng. Impact of COL on the Participation Behavioral Pattern of Learners and Tutors in the Online Discussion Forum. Research Paper, April 2005.

1. Overall satisfaction with the technical equipment for OUM's internal communication? (1=very...5= not at all)

The average score is only medium (3.0) and speaks to the fact that even though the technical requirements are given, there is a lot of room for improvement.

2. Outgoing Emails (related to ODL):
 - a) How many emails did you send last week?
 - b) How many of those were initiated by you?
 - c) How many of those were responding to others?

As expected, the usage of emails varies a lot. Between 8 and 30 emails were being sent to others. For the pre-test sample the initiation rate (b) /c)) is between 33-60% which means that all 10 participants of our sample were ordinary medium, neither notorious senders or receivers.

3. Incoming Emails: How many incoming emails (except external SPAM) did you receive last week?

The amount of incoming emails within the population (n=10) varied between 8 and 49, certainly depending on the function and the individual usage rate of email. In addition, it might be due to further research whether there are differences in terms of hierarchy, namely if some of the top managers receive many more emails than others due to their position as decision makers and formal superiors. This question is important, since if the reformed system is based upon mutuality, these users would have more time to allocate to answer emails.

4. Try to distinguish the following categories of your last week's incoming emails as well as you can (please state):
 - d) answer required, and provided to me within 2 days
 - e) answer required, and provided to me later
 - f) answer required, and not provided to me
 - g) answer required, and met the addressee on purpose
 - h) answer required, and met the addressee coincidentally
 - i) answer required, and I am still waiting within 2 days
 - j) answer required, and I reminded in vain
 - k) answer required, and I reminded successfully

According to the traffic light model, three categories of satisfaction can be derived from the table above:

1. **Green** (Email communication is running smoothly and satisfactory): Emailing is like playing "ping-pong" on mutual request. Everybody responds on requested time frames until the matter is settled. Generally speaking, satisfactory results were provided in 38 + 41 cases, with a time-near response within 2 days or at least within the week under inspection (= 47%).
2. **Yellow** (Email communication is unsatisfactory, since it has to go through surmountable obstacles): In 71 cases the senders had to get active again and remind by or by a follow-up email, by phone-calls and/or seeing the person personally, which could be time-consuming. Per contact an estimated 5 minutes has to be allocated, provided the sender runs an effective reminder system. Meaning: during one week the 10 senders had to invest 355 minutes of additional work time to "chase" the non-responding recipients. If this figure were to be extrapolated within the whole organisation, OUM with 400 staff would have to spend 14,200 minutes a week * 250 days (annual work time) = 3,550.000 minutes = 59,166.7 hours a year!
3. **Red** (Email communication is very unsatisfactory, since it drops down due to the fact that the recipient does not reply and/or the sender gives up or loses track): In 12 cases it was not possible for the sender to get through at all, with not yet scrutinised consequences.

Out of these results the "unsuccessful reminder rate" can be derived:

$$\frac{\text{Unsuccessful Reminders}}{\text{Successful Reminders}} = 28.81\% \text{ (Nearly any 3}^{\text{rd}} \text{ reminder was in vain)}$$

This figure is reflected by the "critical non-response-rate for the sender" of no or no time-near response of 2 working days, which was 66%:

The subjective sender's theory (SST) why the recipient does not answer could be traced into the following categories deriving from question 5:

5. In case of 4. b)-g): why do you think, the addressees did not revert to you?
Please comment (you can also distinguish anonymously, e.g. person A, B, ...)

It is assumed by the participants that the following disturbances might have occurred when the recipient did not reply on a scale between "unintentional" till "intentional":

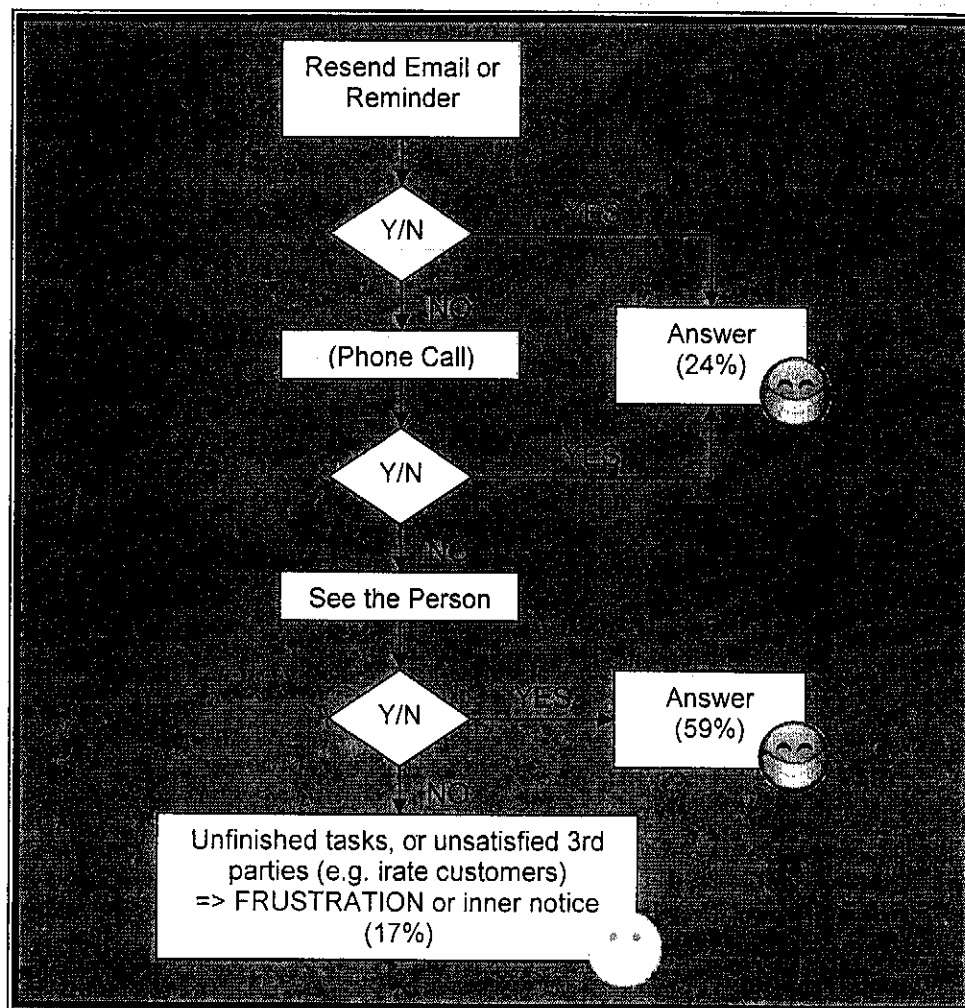
- busy, too occupied with more important things to him/her, didn't read or open email I sent 5
- put off to another day to reply 1
- ignored my email 1
- didn't check their email 1
- didn't receive them due to failure delivery 1
- the recipient maybe doesn't use or consider OUM emails as a means of effective communication 1
- the recipient prefer to communicate via telephone calls rather than emails 1
- didn't recognise importance 1
- overlooked my email 2

All these categories apply to an optimistic image of man. A 5th category which was not mentioned, is disrespect, if the recipient does not take the sender for serious or wants to slow down his/her efforts.

6. How many % of the information requests you sent and you expected an answer never came back to you?

This is an indirect question targeting at the staff's satisfaction. If the sender fails to perceive his or her target, this might be a source of dissatisfaction. In addition, this question represents a subjective revalidation of question 4g). The "lost-email-index" among all 10 participants varies between 0 and 60%, and the average is 23 %.

Figure 2. Process of Dealing with unanswered Emails



RECOMMENDATIONS

For the reform of virtual communication in AHE, prior to a concrete action plan the following general conclusions can be drawn:¹

1. We can distinguish between SYMMETRIC and ASSYMETRIC RELATIONSHIPS. At first sight, it is an obvious goal to increase symmetric relationships. At the same time, however, the organisation has to find ways to reduce unnecessary emails that cloak the communication flow and definitely will lead to asymmetric sender-recipient relationships.
2. The usage of the email system is only by 53% satisfactory for the sender (asymmetric since reminder necessary or no response). We have not yet focused on the recipient's satisfaction.
3. So far, within the organisation formal procedures or information material that could assist to symmetrise the system are not to be found yet. Participants of the systems play out by ears, and feel sometimes left in uncertainty how to do emailing right for the comfort both of senders and recipients.
4. A significant increment of the response rate for pending emails and a decrement of unnecessary emails can only be increased if an overt action plan is being implemented that reforms the current use.
5. An increment of symmetric relations may not necessarily mean increment in terms of work load. It must be assured that incoming email-prone recipients do not face increment of work, or get at least support by delegating the filtering of emails.

The most drastic measure to protect both senders and recipients from over-flooding and from setting wrong priorities is to forbid emails. The City of Liverpool bans emails once a week. The effect is that staff can do their

¹ Cf. Caron Osberg (2002). How to keep e-learners online. 56(10), 45. In Proquest. (OUM Digital Collection).

Kuldip Kaur (2005). Strategies for online facilitation. Tutor Connexions. Issue No. 6 (March 2005). [Online]. Retrieved: April 6, 2005 from (<http://www.oum.edu.my>)

work, can train proper usage and are not interrupted all day long by feeling committed to send, check and respond to incoming emails.¹

A more subtle approach that Philip Morris is practicing is that any emails to be answered are responded immediately, because this is part of their implicit corporate culture everyone adopts automatically.

In case of ODL and coming out of the empirical data, a more tailor-made structure and procedure is proposed (3.1 and 3.2). It is stated that the strategy will only be successful, if it is guide-lined by a clear schedule how to proceed from the idea to the implementation (3.3).

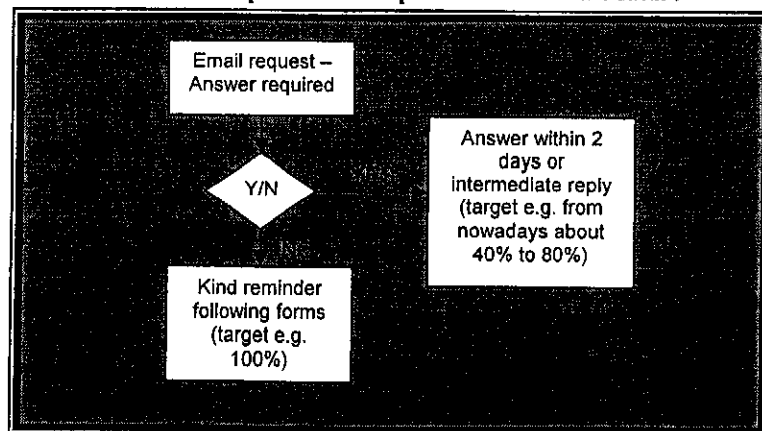
i. STRUCTURE:

The communication can be improved for the internal and subsequently the external customer, if the following 10 Golden Rules of Email-Communication (and: subsequently the virtual discussion forums) can be successfully implemented:

1. At least twice daily and bundled, only (!) at "heavy" & urgent traffic conditions several times daily look into your inbox. Emails are considered very useful tools if the value is neither exaggerated or demoted.
2. Bundle Email-activities, in case of bottlenecks decide according to A (now!), B (later within two working days!) and C-(wait!)priorities. According to the PARETO-principle, only 20% of emails require instant response, whereas the handling of the rest (80%) has to be determined as either B or C by the recipient.
3. Answer A- and B-priorities immediately with "Remail"; if on leave or within periods of work overload by automatically generated received & postponed message (e.g. who takes over in case of your absence).
4. Requests that are not resolvable by E-Mail should be referred to a phone call or a face-to-face (F2F)-dialogue. As a common practice, this should be the case for more personal matters and if the 1st email-reminder was not being answered.
5. Avoid unnecessary information (negative bring-duty) - keep your distribution list tiny with respect to the recipients. In case of uncertainty, it can be found out by feedback, which kind of information is necessary, and which one is abundant.
6. Send abundant or baffling emails back and ask the polite question, how to go about it. By then, the sender knows that this email is no A-priority for the recipient unless the sender can explain.
7. Formulate your messages briefly and unambiguously „up to the point“. If you wish an answer, ask and specify dates politely! The recipient might not know if you ask him or her by just putting an undertone to request so.
8. Delete only such messages that are really done. Recognise "Pending Emails" within your time management system. Control the "Sent-but-not-responded"-Tray.
9. Save messages you might need more often and can be "recycled" within dash-trays under sub-directories. As a consequence, you are able to retrieve necessary correspondence at any time (e.g. S-(tandard), M-(anuscript), L-(ist), ...). E.g. this can be extremely helpful for standard letters to be sent to the students, if a personalised student joins the knowledge journey with the same questions every semester or students do not understand that they have to wait for the results before they complain.
10. If you have a request, and there is no feedback within 2 days, and you know for certain the recipient must have received the information, „my proposed procedure is considered approved or not objected". A very important question e.g. when it comes to decisions that were being delayed before due to the fact that no answer of the recipient caused uncertainty.

ii. PROPOSED STANDARD OPERATION PROCESS (SOP) TO HANDLE CRITICAL NOT RESPONDED EMAILS)

Table 3. How to cope with not responded emails in the future



¹ McGlane, Steven L., v. Glinow, Mary Ann, Organizational Behavior, Boston: McGrawHill, 2005, p.329

iii. PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the derived communication system that might also be applicable for other tools, can be successful, if **top management** decides which of the rules should be implemented and backs them up. As a 2nd step, by **information to any member of the organisation** that they comprehend the importance of having rules. Subsequently, **quizzes, and controlling** by surveys within 6 and 12 months time should be put into place to maintain momentum.

Of course, the importance of actual communication and the worth of seeing a person personally, should not be diminished. Conversely, by following the process generated in table 3 the participants of the system should at any case talk to each other, when they feel the other person is not responding the way the sender expected, and the recipient should be willing to allocate some minutes to clarify those items. In the end, a lot of time, costs and loss of human frictions can be saved, and the advantages of ODL compared to traditional Universities in terms of communication will really become striking.

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