Abstract

Organizations are increasingly adopting new computer-mediated communication systems commonly referred to as electronic mail. The attributes of this new medium hold important implications for the human communication process in organizations, and have led to predictions of a wide range of social impacts on individuals, groups, and organizations. Despite this, organizational communication theorists have largely either ignored electronic mail or examined its use from a limited perspective. Use typically is defined as how many messages a person sends or receives, providing little information about the purposes of electronic mail interactions.

This dissertation fills these important gaps by posing two research questions. The first asks for what purposes people employ electronic mail in organizational settings. The second inquires into what independent factors lead to different patterns of electronic mail use. A large office products vendor served as the research site. Qualitative research, based upon interviews and observations, and a quantitative survey of 220 electronic mail users provided empirical data to address the research questions.

Thirty-two different purposes of use were identified, reflecting a wide range of applications not anticipated by prior studies. A factor analysis demonstrated that a large number of these clustered into task and social use dimensions. Characteristics of respondents' tasks and environments, perceived attributes of electronic mail, demographic characteristics, and system access variables were then entered into a multiple regression analysis predicting the amount of task and social use.

Task use was found to be primarily a function of having a well developed electronic mail infrastructure, with the degree of access to terminals and relevant coworkers explaining a large proportion of variance. Also important were both a positive orientation to the system and a communication need not adequately met via other media. Social use was best explained by demographic factors, with newer and younger employees exhibiting more of this use. This was interpreted to reflect a need for integration into the social network of the organization. A positive orientation was also important in explaining social use. Supplemental analyses, supporting these findings, involved categorizing respondents into user groups reflecting the relative amount of task and social use, and assessing which factors...
discriminate best among groups.
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