

New research finds workers more prone to lie in E-mail

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A pair of recent studies suggest that e-mail is the most deceptive form of communications in the workplace—even more so than more traditional kinds of written communications, like pen-and-paper. More surprising is that people actually feel justified when lying using e-mail, the studies show.

"There is a growing concern in the workplace over e-mail communications, and it comes down to trust," says Liuba Belkin, co-author of the studies and an assistant professor of management at Lehigh University. "You're not afforded the luxury of seeing non-verbal and behavioral cues over e-mail. And in an organizational context, that leaves a lot of room for misinterpretation and, as we saw in our study, intentional deception."

The results of the studies are reported in the paper, "Being Honest Online: The Finer Points of Lying in Online Ultimatum Bargaining." Belkin co-authored the paper along with Terri Kurtzberg of Rutgers University and Charles Naquin of DePaul University.

In one study, the researchers handed 48 full-time MBA students \$89 to divide between themselves and another fictional party, who only knew the dollar amount fell somewhere between \$5 and \$100. There was one pre-condition: the other party had to accept whatever offer was made to them.

Using either e-mail or pen-and-paper communications, the MBA

students reported the size of the pot—truthful or not—and how much the other party would get. Students using e-mail lied about the amount of money to be divided over 92% of the time, while less than 64% lied about the pot size in the pen-and-paper condition. The rate of lying was almost 50% greater between the two groups.

E-mailers also said they felt more justified in awarding the other party just \$29 out of a total pot of about \$56. Pen-and-paper students were a little friendlier, however; on average, they passed along almost \$34 out of a misrepresented pot of about \$67.

"Keep in mind that both of these media—e-mail and pen-and-paper—are text only. Neither has greater 'communication bandwidth' than the other," says Naquin. "Yet we still see a dramatic difference."

Looking for an opportunity to explain whether a shared sense of identity reduces an e-mailer's impulse to lie, the researchers set up a second, related study of 69 full-time MBA students. The results of that study indicated the more familiar e-mailers are with each other, the less deceptive their lies would be.

But they would still lie, regardless of how well they identified with each other.

"These findings are consistent with our other work that shows that e-mail communication decreases the amount of trust and cooperation we see in professional group-work, and increases the negativity in performance evaluations, all as opposed to pen-and-paper systems," explains Kurtzberg. "People seem to feel more justified in acting in self-serving ways when typing as opposed to writing."

Most researchers agree that e-mail is a recent phenomenon and was first widely used in workplace communications beginning in 1994. Since

then, organizational norms regarding e-mail use have evolved and are still murky.

"The study of industrial psychology and the evolving use of e-mail are presenting some interesting challenges for organizations across the board," says Belkin, who has studied organizational communications over the past few years. "We know it's a socially acceptable way to communicate, but how that translates in the workplace is a different story entirely."

Source: Lehigh University

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