

How to improve email communication: Developing strategies to mimic face-to-face interactions

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In a new article in the current issue of *American Journal of Sociology* authors Daniel A. Menchik and Xiaoli Tian (both of the University of Chicago) study how we use emoticons, subject lines, and signatures to define how we want to be interpreted in email. The authors find that "a shift to email interaction requires a new set of interactional skills to be developed."

Unlike face-to-face conversations, email interactions leave out tone of voice, body-language and context, which can lead to misunderstandings. While these authors agree that there are difficulties, they believe that no way of communicating is actually superior to another.

Menchik and Tian argue that face-to-face and internet-based contexts each require a set of distinct interaction strategies. "People can cultivate ways of communicating in online contexts that are equally as effective as those used offline," they write. "The degree to which ... individuals develop unique conventions in the medium will determine their ability to communicate effectively."

The research focuses on "the case of a well-known scientific organization that decided to replace occasional meetings of a research panel with ongoing email interaction." The panel encountered numerous problems conversing via email. But the researchers identified several ways people were able to overcome these barriers.

"People innovate in response to the challenges of a new context for the communication of essential elements of language," the authors write.

Capital letters, use of quotations, emoticons, exclamation points, punctuation, bullet points, style and even color help the sender communicate the meaning of a word or message. For example, "I feel betrayed" reads differently from "I FEEL SO BETRAYED!! ;)" where the capital letters and winking smiley face indicate sarcasm.

Participants also maintained their conversational flow by cutting and pasting from previous emails and using subject lines that referenced previous discussions. In email listservs these devices help address comments to a certain individual and help the discussion to stay on topic.

Signatures, disclaimers and other information about the person's state of mind were also commonly used when writing an email. The authors found that subjects felt more comfortable communicating once they knew a little about each other, like the information included in a signature. They also found that indicating the frame of mind as a disclaimer, (i.e. "I wrote this at 5AM" or "on a blackberry while on vacation") helped prevent the email from being misinterpreted.

Developers have picked up on these cues with the advent of linguistic monitors such as Eudora's MoodWatch feature. This program tries to indicate to the sender that their email might be considered inflammatory, and to the receiver that they are about to receive such an email.

Source: University of Chicago

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