Face-to-face or e-mail:

the medium makes a difference

by Greg Crowther

Each year some 4 trillion e-mails are sent worldwide from about 600 million electronic mailboxes. In 1995, employees sent three e-mails per day and received five. E-mail usage has jumped more than sixfold, with employees now sending an average of 20 e-mails and receiving 30 each day.

During March and April 2001, Rogen International initiated the first study on the effectiveness of e-mail and face-to-face communication in the work place. The study found that the use of e-mail has grown by more than 600 percent in six years, with executives spending at least two hours per day using this communication tool.

More than 1,400 senior- and middle-level executives participated in the international survey. They said that despite popular myth, e-mail has not reduced the amount of face-to-face communication required at work.

While executives are spending an average 120 minutes a day receiving, checking, preparing and sending e-mails, they are also still spending 130 minutes a day in formal and informal face-to-face meetings.

The message from the research is clear. Business leaders should ensure that they maintain the right balance between face-to-face and e-mail. Keeping e-mail relevant to all employees is the challenge. According to the study, more than 30 percent of e-mails received by employees are not directly relevant to their jobs, and this affects an organization's bottom line.

Taking on board this feedback from executives, Table 1 demonstrates the effect of poor e-mail management on productivity:

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Cost in time & dollars of poor e-mail management

Workforce Size (# of employees)	Hours Lost (all employees/Year)	Cost of Hours Lost (in $US)
100	15,000	$420,000
250	37,500	$1,050,000
500	75,000	$2,100,000
1,000	150,000	$4,200,000
5,000	750,000	$21,000,000

TABLE ONE

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The calculations in Table 1 are based on an average compensation cost per employee per year of US$50,000, 225 workdays in a year, and 8 work hours in a day.

E-mail has revolutionized the quick and broad distribution of information. Almost 85 percent of participants in this study agreed that e-mail has improved organizational communication, and e-mail and face-to-face ranked together as preferred channels for general communication. The telephone and written memos/facsimile ranked a distant third and fourth respectively.

This is a clear message to business leaders when they are communicating vital information to employees: Use face-to-face first. Up to 81 percent of respondents prefer to receive good or bad news and other important information face-to-face.

Survey findings clearly show that some business leaders are not selecting the right communication channels for their messages, and, as a result, they are not being persuasive communicators. The research also shows that more than 66 percent of executives believe face-to-face communication skills had declined in their organizations because of the growing use of e-mail.

Greg Crowther is head of strategic communication for the global communication consultancy Rogen International, New York. He led the firm's most recent international study, called "Face-to-Face and E-mail: Getting the Balance Right in Business Communication," a communication study of executives from all major industry sectors in North America, Europe and Asia/Pacific. U.S. firm Goldhaber Research Associates, Amherst, collaborated on the study.

NOTE: You can read the full results of the Rogen International Study, by visiting www.rogenint.com)

Growth in e-mail usage

Two-thirds of the 130 million adult workers in the United States send three billion e-mail messages every day, equating to 21 messages per electronic mail box per day. To put that into perspective, the U.S. Postal Service delivers about 100 billion pieces of mail a year. The Internet delivered 40 times that amount in the U.S. alone last year.

Advantages of e-mail

E-mail does improve the pace of communication down, up and across organizations. It replaces the old "snail mail," the old memo, facsimile and internal newsletter. E-mail is faster and allows the easy and efficient transmission of information across distances. Job-specific information can be sent more promptly thanks to e-mail. It is easier (not better, though) to deliver bad news by e-mail. It enables organizations to communicate internally before news finds its way to public media.

Disadvantages

E-mail is an impersonal, cold, plastic means of communication. It is difficult to resolve personal confrontation via e-mail. Face-to-face is clearly better for resolving these issues, yet some people elect to
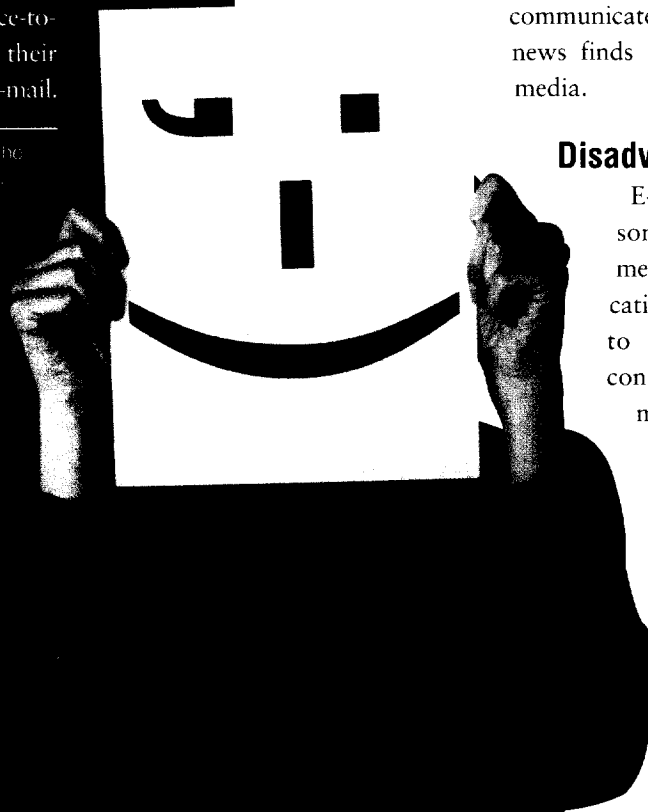
tool or torment?

by Gerald Goldhaber

hide by using e-mail. Messages can be misunderstood on e-mail. Angry tones, abrupt manners, and even humour can all be incorrectly perceived by readers of e-mail. We may think the sender is saying one thing when, in fact, the opposite meaning is true. Employees tell us in survey after survey that they prefer face-to-face communication, especially when they are discussing issues of work-place performance.

E-mail vs. face-to-face

Organizations have found that face-to-face works best in a range of situations, including resolving conflict and minimising misunderstandings, because facial expressions and vocal cues can be observed. Organizations are finding out in their studies that they should not use e-mail to evaluate their employees, because job appraisal and job performance should be done face-to-face. You need to be able to probe for answers and clarify responses. With e-mail, you can lose the ability to improve clarification and reduce misunderstanding. Sensitive and confidential information is also best delivered face-to-face. It's important to understand that there is no privacy on the Internet. Anything and everything can be discovered with the right tools in the wrong hands. Confidential plans can reach the competition through e-mail. So companies today are keeping this type of information more closely held. One company in the IT sector is using a fleet of helicopters to fly its employees face-to-face when key business plans are to be discussed.

Effect of e-mail on the effectiveness of organizational communication

With the average employee spending 2-2.5 hours per day on e-mail, we are finding, in our research, that people are avoiding interpersonal transactions. We are losing the art of face-to-face communication – and it is an art.

With the new reliance on e-mail, we are not as good at listening as we used to be, because we are losing the ability to touch each other both physically and psychologically. What leaders are learning is that online people have more relationships, more contact with people inside and outside their organizations. But those contacts are not as strong, they are not as committed. On e-mail we tend to have a lot of ephemeral contacts and transactions, and they don't lead to richness in human exchange permitted by face-to-face contact.

## Balancing e-mail and face-to-face

The goal of communication in any organization (whether it's online or face-to-face) is the creation and exchange of information so that people can make better decisions.

So the real question is "Can we make better decisions through the e-mail exchange or the face-to-face exchange?" It is up to the leaders to decide whether the decisions they are facing can best be achieved through e-mail or face-to-face.

Tips for leaders to keep their face-to-face skills relevant and persuasive

The first thing we should do is engage in a listening and measurement process to tap into
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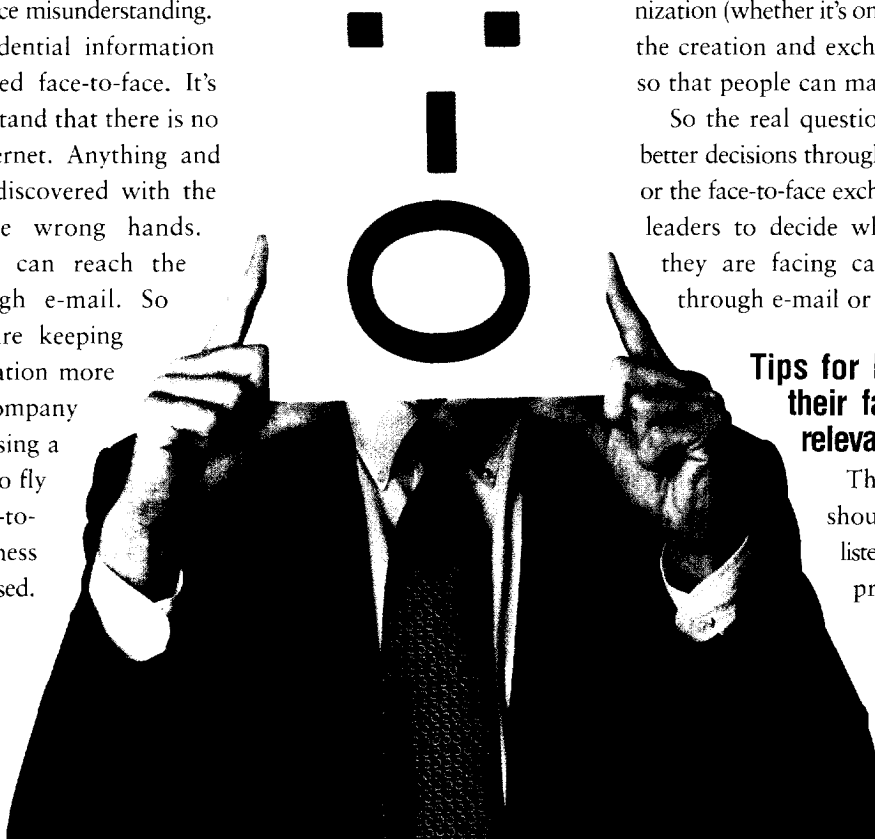
employees' feelings, attitudes, perceptions, wishes, desires and hopes. Next we need to assess the communication skills and abilities of key communicators. If we hear from employees that they want more face-to-face exchange and, at the same time, we hear or observe that communicators are apprehensive or that they lack the skills for interpersonal communication — or those skills have been dormant because they have spending two to three hours a day online — then we need to engage in interpersonal communication training.

In small groups, or one-on-one, people should be given the opportunity to enhance their capabilities, to make them become aware of how they are perceived by others through their interpersonal skills. Focus on eye contact, gestures and hand movements, how you organise your thoughts into short, precise and concise messages, and how to be a good listener. Learn to withhold judgment and listen to what the other person is saying rather than thinking about what you want to say.

Managing E-mail
CONTROLLING YOUR INBOX
>> **Deal with a message once.** Remember the advice "handle a piece of paper once"? The same applies to e-mail. Read an e-mail once, then answer it immediately or delegate it or move it to a project-specific folder for action later.
>> **Get your name off unwanted distribution lists.** Reduce the amount of irrelevant e-mails you receive by asking that your name be deleted from distribution lists that don't add value to what you do.
>> **Choose to receive some, all, or none.** Increasingly, business leaders are diverting incoming e-mails to an assistant. The assistant then takes responsibility for determining whether or not an e-mail should be brought to the attention of the business leader and followed through.
>> **Block unwanted e-mails.** You can take steps to filter out junk or unwanted e-mails from proscribed addresses before they reach you.

PREPARING MESSAGES
>> **Identify the purpose of your message.** "What's the purpose of this e-mail? Will it prompt the receiver to think or act differently? Am I communicating to inform or persuade? Should this message be delivered by e-mail or by another medium?"
>> **Use the "subject" line effectively.** Like a newspaper banner, headline the content of your message in the "subject" line. Proper labeling makes it easier for the recipient to glance at his or her inbox and identify your message as

worthwhile reading. The Importance Flag should be used only when the message is clearly important.
>> **Indicate what action is required.** To help the receivers of your messages quickly scan their in-box and understand what they need to so as a result of your e-mail, you should include a sign-off message in the subject line.
TRY THESE:
ACTION REQUIRED *(but only from receiver, not those CCd)*
INPUT NEEDED *(looking to gain feedback)*
WOW! *(for sharing case studies, best practice, etc.)*
UPDATE *(status of a project, no response required)*
FYI *(no response required, send questions to the sender only)*
NRR *(no response required)*
EOM *(end of message)*
>> **Be clear in your messages.** Do your e-mails convey a complete communication? Can your recipient quickly understand what you are communicating, why you have sent the e-mail, and what you want to happen as a result of the e-mail? Layout can also make your message more effective. If your eyes get tired, so do your readers'.
>> **Make attachments easy to reference.** If you attach a lengthy document, direct the recipient to the critical part(s) of the attachment.
>> **Be careful about the size of attachments.** Attachments up to 500kb are usually okay, but think very carefully about anything 1kb or more.
>> Never send an attachment unless you know the recipient has the software needed to open it. The same goes for MIME-encoded or HTML-encoded messages.

SELECTING YOUR AUDIENCES
>> **Choose recipients carefully.** With the objective of your message clearly in mind, select the most appropriate recipients. Do you need them to think or do something different as a result of your e-mail? Likewise, copy (CC) people on your e-mail only when it is absolutely necessary for them to be kept informed
>> **Use "Reply to All" sparingly.** Ask yourself "Do all these people really need to receive this message? Why don't I respond only to the sender of the message?" Technology makes it much easier (but not necessarily more effective) to communicate with many more people at the same time.

Gerald Goldhaber is professor of communication at the State University of New York at Buffalo and also president of Goldhaber Research Associates (GRA), Amherst, N.Y. He collaborated with Rogen to conduct the 2001 study on Balancing E-mail and Face-to-Face in Workplace Communication.