

: Is email a good decision support tool?

by Dan Power

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NO! Although many of us have grown attached to email over the years and our email tools have gotten more sophisticated, the truth is that email was not intended as a decision support tool. Managers need to avoid using it for such support. The first email system was developed in 1961, but commercial email was not widely available until 1988 when MCI Mail and Compuserve connected to the NSFNET (the Internet). Email was the "killer app" of the ARPANET, NSFNET, and the pre-1995 Internet.

During the past 2 weeks, I was teaching an MBA course about Management Information and Decision Support Systems in Hong Kong. During the humid afternoons, I had some time to read two current novels that use email exchanges in the story line. In "The Teeth of the Tiger", Tom Clancy (2003) writes a predictable story about how terrorists use email to hatch a plot and how the NSA and CIA use technology to decipher their encrypted messages and track the seemingly anonymous email messages. A secret group at "The Campus" then intercepts the U. S. Government computer traffic and tracks down and assassinates some of the terrorists. Both the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are using email. Lapses in email security by the "bad guys", leads to their down fall. Tim Green (2000) begins his novel "While he knew that Internet opened a doorway to the world, Walt Tanner had no idea that it would also allow evil to slip in through the back ..." In a subplot in "The Letter of the Law", Walt Tanner, a traveling salesman who seeks romance on the Internet in chat rooms, hooks up instead with a serial killer who arranges to meet him in the guise of a sexual encounter. The male killer deceives Tanner and he becomes another victim. The policeman hero, Detective Sergeant Bob Bolinger, is unfamiliar with the Internet and instead relies on other officers to get important evidence that is encrypted on the killer's portable computer. Neither novel is great literature, but they show how email has become entrenched in our popular psyche. The novels also demonstrate some of the reasons why email is a poor decision support tool.

Email can support task coordination and decision making, but the messages are not secure. Also, people can deceive others using the Internet and email. Although internal company mail systems are more secure and the identities of recipients are more reliably known than

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when using commercial email, an internal email system still has problems when used to support decision making and to communicate sensitive decision related information. I categorize electronic mail as a very simple communications-driven decision support tool. It is an asynchronous method of composing, sending, storing, and receiving messages. Even with multiple recipients, email is a one-to-many broadcast of information.

Personally, I use both desktop email clients, like Microsoft Outlook Express, and web-based mail clients. The web-based clients let me check my email no matter where I happen to be working. I receive many emails every day and I coordinate my activities with colleagues, clients and students using email. I feel out of touch when I don't have access to email for more than a few days and after a day without email access my in-basket is overflowing with work messages and spam. I never liked spam as a kid and I hate spam in my email. Despite filters and a spam appliance at work, I still get too much junk mail that wastes my time. The usefulness of email is threatened by security issues, spamming (junk mail), phishing (impersonation), and email worms and viruses. Email is not a private or privileged means of communication, but in some situations it is the best tool available. In general, it can be used to convey simple task directions, request or share decision relevant information and communicate choices. Email is not a tool for collaboration, give and take, bargaining and negotiating. Email privacy, without some security precautions, can be easily compromised; email is often cryptic and such a limited communications environment can lead to misunderstandings; email can create a troublesome paper trail in legal situations; email can be anonymous to a certain extent; email can be habit forming; and email can create information overload.

A recent Korn/Ferry survey of 2,300 global executive found that 81% are connect to work through mobile devices. Almost 40% of those surveyed strongly agreed that "they spend too much time connected to communications devices". Email is here to stay and mobile devices like the Blackberry are proliferating. We have made improvements in email with the capability to request that recipients acknowledge receiving an email, polling tools like Zap mail, encryption software, and threaded mail systems. These improvements don't resolve the basic problems mentioned above and I like Internet based voice and video better as decision support tools. With web-based video conferencing systems, two or more participants communicate using live video images over the Internet. Video conferencing with voice, chat and whiteboards is a much better tool than email for decision support. While I was in Hong Kong this trip, I made extensive use of Skype (www.Skype.com), a

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free Internet Voice over IP and video conferencing tool and my email usage was reduced from prior years. The length of messages to my wife was especially reduced because we chatted in the morning and evening each day for about 10 minutes. I also used Microsoft Messenger. The video wasn't great, but it worked and most of my communication was voice only. I'm sure the video will get better and we'll have it on our mobile devices.

In the quest for more and better communications-driven decision support, organizations will need to define realistic business needs and email will certainly continue as part of the mix, but video conferencing is becoming a realistic tool as well. Email is an effective tool for providing quick yes or no answers, for finding an information source, for making appointments for a voice, video or face-to-face meeting, and for distributing large amounts of information quickly. BUT ...

Email can become a time "trap" and it is inherently an impersonal means of communication. Email requires active ongoing participation to create a conversation, if it is to be used at all for decision support. You need to check you email very often when you are using email to support decision making.

Well that about summarizes the pros and cons of email as a decision support tool. Company policy should be to avoid using email for sensitive discussions and decision support. Bill Gates, Bill Clinton and George Bush learned that email leaves a paper trail that lawyers will use to their advantage. It seems that people are careless in what they write in email messages and the messages are powerful evidence in Civil and Criminal proceeding. Lawyer Jeffrey Elkin suggests two questions that managers should always ask when they use email:

"1) Would you mind having your e-mail message shown on a giant poster board to a jury? and 2) Would you mind having your e-mail appear on the front page of the newspaper? If the answer is 'yes' to one or both of these questions, that e-mail should not be sent." That's good advice that we all need to remember!

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As always, I appreciate you comments and feedback to my columns in the email newsletter DSS News. Email has been an inexpensive way for me to share my ideas about computerized decision support systems with readers in more than 50 countries for the past 6 years. Thanks and keep those Ask Dan! emails coming.

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