

E-Mail Is Easy to Write (and to Misread)

by Daniel Goleman



AS I was in the final throes of getting my most recent book into print, an employee at the publishing company sent me an e-mail message that stopped me in my tracks.

I had met her just once, at a meeting. We were having an e-mail exchange about some crucial detail involving publishing rights, which I thought was being worked out well. Then she wrote: "It's difficult to have this conversation by e-mail. I sound strident and you sound exasperated."

At first I was surprised to hear I had sounded exasperated. But once she identified this snag in our communications, I realized that something had really been off. So we had a phone call that cleared everything up in a few minutes, ending on a friendly note.

The advantage of a phone call or a drop-by over e-mail is clearly greatest when there is trouble at hand. But there are ways in which e-mail may subtly encourage such trouble in the first place.

This is becoming more apparent with the emergence of social neuroscience, the study of what happens in the brains of people as they interact. New findings have uncovered a design flaw at the interface where the brain encounters a

computer screen: there are no online channels for the multiple signals the brain uses to calibrate emotions.

Face-to-face interaction, by contrast, is information-rich. We interpret what people say to us not only from their tone and facial expressions, but also from their body language and pacing, as well as their synchronization with what we do and say.

Most crucially, the brain's social circuitry mimics in our neurons what's happening in the other person's brain, keeping us on the same wavelength emotionally. This neural dance creates an instant rapport that arises from an enormous number of parallel information processors, all working instantaneously and out of our awareness.

In contrast to a phone call or talking in person, e-mail can be emotionally impoverished when it comes to nonverbal messages that add nuance and valence to our words. The typed words are denuded of the rich emotional context we convey in person or over the phone.

E-mail, of course, has a multitude of virtues: it's quick and convenient, democratizes access and lets us stay in touch with loads of people we could never see or call. It enables us to accomplish huge amounts of work together.

Still, if we rely solely on e-mail at work, the absence of a channel for the brain's emotional circuitry carries risks. In an article to be published next year in the *Academy of Management Review*, Kristin Byron, an assistant professor of management at Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management, finds that e-mail generally increases the likelihood of conflict and miscommunication.

One reason for this is that we tend to misinterpret positive e-mail messages as more neutral, and neutral ones as more negative, than the sender intended. Even jokes are rated as less funny by recipients than by senders.

We fail to realize this largely because of egocentricity, according to a 2005 article in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Sitting alone in a cubicle or basement writing e-mail, the sender internally “hears” emotional overtones, though none of these cues will be sensed by the recipient.

When we talk, my brain’s social radar picks up that hint of stridency in your voice and automatically lowers my own tone of exasperation, all in the service of working things out. But when we send e-mail, there’s little to nothing by way of emotional valence to pick up. E-mail lacks those channels for the implicit meta-messages that, in a conversation, provide its positive or negative spin.

On the upside, the familiarity that develops between sender and receiver can help to reduce these problems, according to findings by Joseph Walther, a professor of communication and telecommunication at Michigan State University. People who know each other well, it turns out, are less likely to have these misunderstandings online.

These quirks of cyberpsychology are familiar to Clay Shirky, an adjunct professor in New York University’s interactive telecommunications program. His expertise is social computing — software programs through which multiple users interact, ranging from Facebook to Listservs and chat rooms to e-mail. I asked Professor Shirky what all of this might imply for the multitudes of people who work with others by e-mail.

“When you communicate with a group you only know through electronic channels, it’s like having functional Asperger’s Syndrome — you are very logical and rational, but emotionally brittle,” Professor Shirky said.

“I’m part of a far-flung distributed network that at one point was designing a piece of software for sharing medical data; we worked mostly by conference calls and e-mail, and it was going nowhere. So we finally said we’d all fly to Boston and get together for two days, just sit in a room and hash it out.”

During that meeting, the team got an enormous amount of work done. And, Professor Shirky recalls, “because the synchronization by e-mail was so much better after the face-to-face piece, we actually hit the launch date.”

He proposes that work groups whose members are widely dispersed but need to have high levels of coordination — say, a computer security team protecting a global bank — do not have to assemble everyone in one room to reap the same benefit. Instead, he suggests a “banyan model,” after the Asian tree that puts down roots from its branches.

In this approach, he said, “you put down little roots of face-to-face contact everywhere, to strategically augment electronic communications.”

Professor Shirky advised the I.T. head of a global bank to gather together one representative from disparate cities for a day or two and complete tasks. That way, when the security group in Singapore gets e-mail from the security people in London, someone will be more likely to know the sender, and sense how to read the information with less risk of misconstruing or discounting it.

CONSIDER, too, the “e-mail the guy down the hall” effect: as the use of e-mail increases in an organization, the overall volume of other kinds of communication drops — particularly routine friendly greetings. But lacking these seemingly innocuous interactions, people feel more disconnected from co-workers. This was noted in an article in *Organizational Science* almost a decade ago, just as e-mail was starting to surge. Saying “Hi,” it turns out, really does matter; it’s social glue.

As Professor Shirky puts it, “social software” like e-mail “is not better than face-to-face contact; it’s only better than nothing.”

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