

The role of e-mail in the organization

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Abstract

This short article outlines the role e-mail plays in a modern organization and explores how it can be used better in the organization.

Organizational Structure and Communication

Most organizations are built on some form of hierarchy. This hierarchy in any organization is to ensure easier control and hence (to some extent) simplify its administration. Hierarchy implicitly affects the communication routes in the organization. Lateral communication tends to be implied and informal at the lower levels of hierarchy. Organizations with fewer or no levels of hierarchy are experimental and usually tend to be small.

Information plays a key role in any modern organization. Most large corporates have a designated CIO (Chief Information Officer) to monitor and assist the flow of information in the organization. The functioning of any organization depends on information, both internal and external to the organization itself.

Because of modern technology, primarily those facilitating communication and travel, the environment in which today's organization functions, experiences rapid change (whose pace is dictated by technology). A rapidly changing environment usually necessitates all elements inside the environment (and hence every organization) to react at an equivalent pace.

The need for more communication

I believe any group of individuals working together as a team need to communicate with each other. This is true of any kind of team - sports team, quiz team, the military, [just name it].

The reason behind this is:

- To the external environment the team interacts as one entity
- and hence needs to have a strong element of consistency within itself

This means: to a redundant level everyone within the team needs to know what everyone else in the team knows (and thinks). The military achieves this partially by enforcing authority (that cannot be questioned.)

The most communicative teams I've seen are [ironically] the crack "dumb-charades" teams at competitions. (I am sure all of you would agree). Doubles Teams in Tennis also use a strong communication framework based on gestures to function better as a team.

It's almost historical and proven that the strongest teams in the world are the distributed ones (read "The Toyota Way" [or] "Six Degrees"). Distributed teams cannot function without communication (it's the spine of the whole team.) In nature, most systems (including living organisms) work as distributed systems relying primarily on some communication mode.

Hierarchy ensures control, but makes communication difficult (and slower) [by limiting the communication routes]. (Something the management gurus have learnt the hard way over many years). The more communication happens and the more the routes are, the easier it is for everyone to react quickly and easily to any stimuli.

Where e-mail fits the picture ...

While telephony and IM (Instant Messaging) are strong communication tools, they are more one-to-one communication tools (except when you conference). Unless these conversations are scribed [recorded] and further communicated through an alternate medium, (apart from providing privacy) they do not fit the basis for the team too well.

E-mail by its nature fits the one-to-one and a one-to-many (broadcast) role very well allowing lots of people to listen to communication without any requirement for intervention. It seems to help us strike the balance between more communication and control of information that is communicated. Anyone can communicate with anyone else letting everyone know about it with the most minimal intervention required. Anyone else aware of the communication can react appropriately with little extra-work on their part. It is also easier to refer to past communication (e-mail threads).

Despite the existence of any form of hierarchy in the organization, e-mail flattens the communication landscape allowing information to flow easier. It is in-line with the extra-somatic information storage that has dominated the evolution of modern civilization.

The e-mail clients of today (which offer us a lot of choice but still work with the standard), with filtering and search capabilities, make the job of reading, responding and archiving e-mail easy. Much can be achieved using e-mail (without the addition of any fancy collaboration tools.)

Verbal communication and Meetings have limited bandwidth (and lack the broadcast capability to the extent that e-mail does). Archiving and/or referring to prior verbal communication (or meetings) is still difficult. They also require some form of immediate response (which in many cases is not possible.)

The entire opensource movement has been fueled by the existence of e-mail and mailing lists (that function on top of e-mail).

Many management textbooks suggest that the role of most "managers" in organizations/teams/companies is to facilitate communication and in some cases act as communication conduits themselves. This would explain the role of those who keep darting from one meeting to another (as communicators).

Reading, Writing and Responding to e-mail

Most individuals in any organization have a good quantum of work assigned to us. A sizable portion of this work relates to some creative/intellectual work (that in most cases cannot be done effectively by automatons). We need to keep everyone else in the team informed (or updated) about our work to help those who are dependent on our work and to facilitate our team to act as the same entity (as far as possible).

Any manager, apart from any creative/intellectual work they're involved in, need to ensure that all communication within the organization and within their own sub-team is complete. This usually amounts to a heavy quantum of work (many a time larger than the actual work assigned to them).

Electronic mail (e-mail), by it's very design (visit www.imc.org for details) is suited to serve as one of the most practical communication mediums available. It can be used for all communication inside the organization if employed properly.

Sending and Receiving e-mail to and from our peers is a very simple task (if you can manage the typing). Simple tasks like acknowledging receipt of e-mail and responding quickly can make communication through e-mail very efficient. To make this possible (and easier), we can:

- setup auto responders to indicate that our e-mail client has indeed received the mail
 - (or personally acknowledge receipt of e-mail wherever possible)
- read e-mail, act appropriately, set ourselves time-limits to respond to/comment on e-mail
- request to be removed from a communication list which we are not involved in (the process or the communication), to avoid false perception to the rest
- use e-mail to backup conversation or communication of any other sort
 - to provide a record of the communication
 - make it simpler and easier for people to respond to issues asynchronously (I believe most people like working things out in their own time rather than right-there-right-then.)
 - to document any telephone conversations (with clients, etc.) and meetings.

This does not mean that we need to respond/ack all mails we are copied("cc'd") on. (In most cases this might be an impossible task.)

Instead, to facilitate the communication process, It is best that we acknowledge the e-mail and indicate that we are in some way using / reacting to it.

- If we have received an e-mail addressed "to" ourselves [OR]
- we have received an e-mail addressed "to" ourselves and a group

Most of this is also useful at a personal level to keep our social networks functioning. People who do not respond to some form of communication usually tend to get isolated into social islands. e-mail can help retain our social networks without losing the convenience of responding-at-will and privacy.

The quality of most organizations can be measured by the time they take to respond. e-mail definitely helps the functioning of the organization in its ability to respond collectively.

I wrote this document because many of us working in today's internet-enabled economy (in modern organizations) fail to realize the importance of e-mail as a flat communication medium (and respond too slow or not at all). Some day, more advancement in technology will make it yet easier for communication (that wouldn't help unless we realize the role of communication.) I also feel that the use of fancy tools (within the organization) to facilitate organizational communication is usually unnecessary when a widespread easy-to-use standard like e-mail is available.