



Lost in Translation

By Laura Reid, originally published in PeopleTalk Magazine Winter 2008

wethR ur a snr mgr o an entry-lvl MployE, ther's n denyng dat email & IM R changN evrtng bout d way we communic8 n 2days ofis. NE1 hu tinkz dat thR web chatz n mailz wIL nevr come bak 2 haunt dem is sorely mistakN.

Did that make any sense to you? Try it this way: Whether you are a senior manager or an entry-level employee, there is no denying that email and instant messaging are changing everything about the way we communicate in today's office. Anyone who thinks that their web chats and emails will never come back to haunt them is sorely mistaken.

You have probably read the opening paragraph, or one disturbingly like it, in an email that was supposed to be from an articulate professional with an excellent grasp of business English. As people have grown more comfortable with email and web messaging, many have grown too comfortable with it. Many of us now let the casual, careless slang of our personal chats bleed into our professional communications, with disastrous results. Even if you are meticulous about your own messages, chances are that many of your staff members are not, and their newly sloppy English sends an unwelcome message about the professionalism and attention to detail of your organization.

So what are your options? Grumbling about the decline of the English language and periodically sending back your employees' correspondence speckled in red ink is unlikely to accomplish much – particularly if your organization is large or has lots of diverse departments. Leading by example, with careful and professional emails and messages, is an important step in the right direction. A concerted effort to train your employees in the value of professional communications will have a more thorough and lasting effect. Consider writing an "E-Communications Code of Conduct" that spells out your expectations for email and other online messages, both between members and with outside contacts. And do not tolerate a slide in communications quality – it is much easier to maintain high standards than to repair them once they have slipped.

The witless mangling of the English language may be the most irritating side effect of the rise of electronic communication, but it is not the worst. In this electronic climate, everything you and your employees do online leaves a paper trail that is incredibly hard to erase. We all know that our company emails are logged on the central server, but many people are unaware that instant messenger conversations are often permanently saved, as are many personal webmail messages (like Hotmail and Google Mail). We are used to considering the Internet an oasis of anonymity, when the reality is just the opposite. Behave as though everything you write and say online is being recorded and labeled with your name – because it usually is. For the sake of corporate productivity and employee privacy, employees need to understand that any communications on company machines leave a lasting electronic trail.

Not only is all that chat time a huge drain on company resources, but the electronic trail often leads straight to corporate liability. Inappropriate emails and chat messages have lately become a major component of harassment claims. So even if your corporate policies tolerate a certain amount of e-procrastination, you need to spell out your company's exact stand on e-communication that contains material of a sexual or discriminatory nature – even including suggestive jokes. Failing to do so will leave your company vulnerable to the legal claim that it fostered harassment – a devastating charge that can be avoided with a little foresight. Remember, too, that anything that can be found by investigators can also be unearthed by the media. Anything you would not want the whole world to read should not go into an email at all.

Of course, many subjects simply are not made for email. We suggest an easy rule for all staff in your organization: do not write an email if you are frustrated, angry, or feeling overwhelmed - period. Any negative words will seem vastly more unpleasant if they are sent in a text-only format. Without the moderating influence of tone of voice, eye contact, and other essential nonverbal communications, a minor criticism can easily explode into a full-blown feud. If there is something or someone you are unhappy with, deal with the problem in person, or at least by phone. Anything else can be a recipe for brutal workplace conflict.

Many companies are rushing to improve the quality of electronic communication, but most overlook the simple fact that often the most effective email is one that is never sent. Particularly in a small organization, exchanging a blizzard of emails with the person two offices down the hall is horrendously inefficient and often offensive. We have become so dependent on email that we often forget that we can convey far more information, far more effectively, with a 2-minute phone call or face-to-face chat than we can with a dozen emails.

That does not even take into account the enormous relationship-building benefits of real human contact. Many sales staff, for example, now follow sales leads mainly by email. This might seem efficient at first glance, but it squanders the chance to build a strong personal connection and a loyalty that will last in the long run. Reemphasize personal contact, and all your relationships with clients, stakeholders, staff members, and management will be much stronger for it.

Email and other types of online communication are very powerful tools for building networks, but organizations in all fields should resist the temptation to let them become substitutes for every kind of relationship-building. Talk to your people about which kinds of communications work well in emails and which ones need to take place in the old-fashioned real world. Every organization has different communications needs, and your policies need to reflect the unique requirements of your people and your business environment. Always remember the importance of high professional standards in e-communications, and the irreplaceable value of face-to-face conversation - even in today's wired world.

