

Misuse of Information Technology

10 years of an average working life spent on email with over three years wasted.

INTRODUCTION

An EU-wide survey commissioned by Plantronics, Inc. from the Henley Management College's Centre for Business in the Digital Economy provides new insight into how managers actually use information and communications technology (ICT) within their organisations and what impact the technology is having on the enterprise in general.

The survey makes uncomfortable reading for anyone who believed new technology would automatically break down the barriers to communication, transforming organisations for the better.

Rather, it suggests that close to half our 'communications time' at work is spent fielding and generating emails of which a full third are superfluous or irrelevant. The extensive use of e-mail for internal transactions is being questioned as a substitute for phone or face-to-face discussion particularly as the lapsed time for decisions is being elongated.

The Henley findings also highlight the extent to which electronic work has intruded into home life, creating an expectation of being always connected.

True, good use of ICT has benefited operational performance by speeding response times, allowing more effective information sharing, greater inclusivity among organisations, better processes and improved support for decision-making.

At the same time, it is making working life increasingly faceless, reducing individual freedom to act and greater emphasis on protecting one's own position.

Managers from a wide range of industries across a number of countries, primarily within the EU, participated in the questionnaire survey. Many were from large firms and at all levels in the enterprise but mainly senior within the business or a business unit.

Where firms make good use of ICT to support decision making, networking and increasing flexibility managers report a positive impact on operational performance.

Respondents saw plenty of scope to improve the effectiveness of ICT, including:

- Greater emphasis on synchronous rather than asynchronous working
- Availability of better decision-support tools
- Access to specialist information services
- Better systems integration across the business overall
- Work to identify, develop and maintain appropriate organisational cultures
- Making organisations more receptive and able to absorb new developments in ICT
- Training programmes to improve personal effectiveness in information management



THE STUDY

The Henley team used a specially designed questionnaire to collect responses from 181 managers (27% being executive directors, 30% senior managers, 32% middle managers, 11% junior managers). They were employed in a wide range of business sectors with 17% in IT, 12% in manufacturing, 10% telecoms, 10% business services. The organisation size varied considerably but most of the firms surveyed were large organisations (27% had 250-999 employees, 43% had more than 1,000 employees; 53% were companies with a turnover exceeding €100m.

The companies surveyed were based in several different countries, including 27% in Germany, 22% in the UK, 18% in Sweden and 10% in Denmark. The number of direct reports also varied considerably. The ages of those surveyed covered a wide spectrum as well with 20% under 35, 51% aged 35-44, 24% aged 45-54 and 5% 55 and over.

FINDINGS

Manager's access to the organisation's technology infrastructure

Many managers appear equipped to work 'any place, any time', with almost 90% having access to e-mail when working remotely and around 70% also having remote access to centrally stored files and shared folders. In addition, 65% of respondents said they could access the company's management information systems when working remotely. However, few managers are equipped to take full advantage, since their remote working facilities tend to be simple communication tools, rather than information support systems.

The typical manager spends a considerable proportion of the working day in meetings (21% over three hours a day) or conference calls (26% spent one hour or more per day). Phone use varied, with 34% reporting spending less than one hour per day on average but 27% using the phone for two hours or more. Managers also use the Internet (23% for two or more hours per day) as well the company Intranet.

However the greatest absorber of management time appears to be e-mail, with 61% of respondent spending two hours or more reading and generating mail.

Half our managers claimed to respond to emails as they arrived, but many prioritised - 'depending on relevance and urgency', 'according to importance'.

However, only 12% of the managers felt that at least 75% of their e-mails were essential to the job; By contrast, 35% rated just a quarter of the e-mails received as essential and 21% indicated that just 10% of received e-mails were essential.

Indeed, 31% of respondents reported that 50% of mails received were irrelevant. So for many managers this meant significant time wasted.

E-mails also generate responses: with each new mail typically generating up to two rounds of discussion (46% of respondents), three or four rounds (41%) – even up to six rounds (13%). Much of this traffic may be generated by original non-clarity, with 43% of managers indicating that only one in ten e-mails clearly conveyed the intended message. A senior manager responsible for commercial search strategy in a global US content provider highlighted what he sees as a more general communications problem:

"It is not the medium but the way it is used that is the problem. Poor communication skills manifest themselves in email, on the phone, and in face-to-face meetings – they do not discriminate against email and other electronic media. Some people in our company do not know

when to pick up the phone and try to discuss complex issues via email in front of large audiences – this is bad practice”

Most emails are dealt with by managers at the work place. However, for some, the accessibility of electronic systems at any time, any place has enabled work to intrude more into life outside work with attendant personal disadvantages.

So, overall, we get a picture of much management time, during working hours, being spent on e-mails where often the intended message is unclear and other media might have been more appropriately used. Managers have to sort through the clutter for what is relevant for their own decision purposes. Additionally, for some, systems encroach into their personal life outside work, although the proportion complaining of this was not high. Whilst this may appear to be the result of the manager's personal choice some comments indicate an increasing organisational expectation.

Impacts on decision-making

The under-35 and the 45-54 groups reported a higher impact on decision-making than the 35-44 and over 55 age groups. It might well be that the younger and older groups are both less sceptical than the knowledgeable 35-44 group.

Managers saw ICT as equally effective in supporting improved decision-making within the office and away from it. But where employee working patterns were seen as more flexible, ICT was not universally seen as improving the manager's effectiveness in the office. The more the managers felt themselves competent in an electronic environment, the more likely they were to report a positive impact on decision-making effectiveness. Additionally, the more managers felt dependent on computer-based systems to perform their role, the more likely they were to report a positive impact on decision-making effectiveness.

Where respondents saw new working practices impacting on relations, face-to-face interaction and their own personal profile, they tended to be positive about its impact on overall effectiveness, both when in the office and when away from it. When the impact on relationships was considered strong, it was also seen as impacting on the sense of effectiveness - but not when working remotely.

Increased contacts (telephone, e-mail and conference calls) and ability to collate information from diverse sources appear significant contributors in the minds of respondents to increased overall operational effectiveness. Many respondents also related a positive impact on their own personal effectiveness as benefiting the enterprise as a whole.

The research also suggests a core group of strong advocates who are much more networked and dependent upon ICT to perform their role since it requires considerable external working. These advocates of ICT also include those who are engaged in work that can benefit from information resources and networks to carry out analysis effectively. For those whose work is more inwardly focused, there is no clear relationship between access to systems and perceived personal or organisational operational performance.

A high proportion of negative responses related to training programmes in the use of electronic resources: A tenth of the respondents reported that these programmes were not at all effective, while 39% saw them as ineffective. Training in the management of information was seen as ineffective by 65% of our respondents.

Managers also wanted more effective policies to protect intellectual property (30% reported inadequacy). Moreover, many respondents also cited inadequacies in their employer's information management policy for computer-based systems (28%) or review of cost/benefits (58%).



CONCLUSION

The survey suggests that European managers spend at least two hours per day dealing with email communications (equivalent to 10 years of a typical working life).

However, this survey suggests that at least three of those years are wasted, since almost a third of the messages read and sent are considered irrelevant.

The study further suggests an explosion in email traffic taking place, with every mail sent generating a trail of between four to six additional items reaching the inbox. The extensive use of email, particularly for internal transactions is questioned by a significant proportion of managers as a substitute for face-to-face or voice discussion, particularly as email is seen to prolong decision-making.

The study shows that, used effectively, email can help improve process and the sharing of information as well as support decision making, however if not used smartly it can create a faceless environment, reduce the ability of the individual to act and put an emphasis on protecting one's own position. In contrast, speaking on the phone was found to put a stop to the generation of further email traffic, often clarifying issues and speeding up decision-making.

However, despite the proven effectiveness of the phone for communications, the study shows workers rarely pick up the phone, preferring email to share complex issues with large audiences. Since only 43% of managers surveyed felt that a small proportion (10%) of emails sent clearly conveyed the intended message, such messages only serve to create more inbox clutter.

Time wasted on email also has social implications as workers interact less with each other. Where speaking on the phone was actually found to build relationships, use of email was seen to weaken them.

Working 'anytime, anyplace' is possible for many managers in our sample but their access to systems to support them in their job is still limited. For some managers electronic work has moved from the office and office routines to intrude into home-life and some felt that this had become an expectation of their colleagues and customers. Never the less these managers reported clear compensatory benefits.

E-mail is clearly essential for those whose role is outward focused – customer facing, dealing with suppliers or working in dispersed teams, particularly when they spend time away from an office base. Another group dependent on the systems are those using the internet to support analytical work.

The extensive use of e-mail for internal transactions is being questioned as a substitute for F2F discussion particularly as the lapsed time for decisions can be elongated.

Where firms make good use of ICT to support decision making, networking and increase flexibility managers report a positive impact on operational performance.

Cultural changes are being experienced both positively (more responsive as a business, information sharing, inclusivity, improved processes, evidence available to support decision-making) and negatively (facelessness, reduced freedom to act, emphasis on protecting one's own position).

Those in outward facing roles were more positive about ICT's impact on relationship building and in turn personal effectiveness and overall operational effectiveness.

Respondents saw plenty of scope to improve the effectiveness of ICT in support of decision –making but general needs that emerged from the survey included:

- Greater emphasis on synchronous rather than asynchronous working and the tools to support this

- Availability of better decision-support tools
- Access to specialist information services
- Better systems integration across the business overall
- Work to identify and develop appropriate organisational cultures
- Efforts to improve the receptivity and absorptive capacity of the organisation to developments in ICT
- Training programmes to improve personal effectiveness in information management

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