

## **Use of E-mail Communication Technologies by Administrative Professionals**

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### **Background**

Internet technology, which includes e-mail communication, has experienced tremendous growth in business (Buckle, 1996; Love-hate relationship, 1999). E-mail technologies are replacing the more traditional business communications, such as letters and faxes. Since the Internet is fairly easy to use and relatively inexpensive, most large companies make use of e-mail technology (Dichter & Burkhardt, 1999; Osborn, 1999).

Over 90 million workers in the United States sent 1.1 billion business related e-mails per day in 1998, and this use has increased (Dichter & Burkhardt, 1999). E-mail offers unparalleled access to timely and useful business data (Okula, 1998; Raysman, Brown, & Nemeth, 1998). According to Allerton (1998), employees spend approximately 16 hours per week using e-mail.

However, ease of use, accessibility, and convenience does not come without its problems. A survey conducted by SurfWatch (1998) revealed that 24% of time spent online in the workplace could not be classified as work related. In addition, Dichter and Burkhardt (1999) found that each employee spent approximately 30 minutes per day sorting e-mails received and more than 30% of these e-mail messages both sent and received by employees were not associated with their job.

The amount of time employees spend on non-work related use of e-mail, as well as the improper writing (i.e., tone, response time, spelling, grammar and content) has lead many companies to issue e-mail use policies (Deibel, 2000; Post, 2000). More and more, companies are monitoring employees' e-mail communications (American Management Association, 2000; Carelton, 1999; New Guide, 1999; Osborn, 1999).

Yet even though the use of e-mail has caused some concern within businesses, employers still expect and encourage their employees to use the advantages that technologies can offer. Research verifies that success in business depends not only on technology, but also on the ability to integrate new technologies in to the work+place (Abetti, 1994). The present study, therefore, identified the use of e-mail communication technologies by administrative professionals.

## Purpose

The new technologies available in the workplace require proper integration for effective utilization. Documenting the use of e-mail communication technologies by administrative professionals will assist supervisors in determining if these technologies are being used effectively. Computer educators will be able to use this information to design e-mail assignments that relate to the tasks students will be asked to perform in the workplace.

The effective utilization of new technologies for efficient communication should be a priority in business and education. Thus the problem identified in this study was to determine how administrative professionals are using e-mail technologies for communication. A related problem was to determine if there is a relationship between administrative professionals' use of e-mail communication technologies and the demographic variables of age and education.

To investigate this problem, members of the International Association for Administrative Professionals (IAAP) were asked to fill out and return a survey that was included in the *OfficePRO* journal. Members of IAAP receive this publication four times a year. The research sought to:

1. Describe the administrative professional on selected demographics.
2. Describe the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies for communications in the workplace.
3. Compare if there are significant differences between the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies and the age of the participants.
4. Compare if there are significant differences between the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies and the education level of the participants.

The purpose of this study was to provide documentation that could lead to a more efficient way to use and integrate e-mail communication technologies into computer education classrooms. In addition, it will assist employers with a basis for determining if administrative personnel are using e-mail technologies to its fullest potential.

## Methodology

Participants. A census was taken from members of the International Association of Administrative Professional who receive the *OfficePRO* journal. Using this publication distribution as a frame for the study provided information from administrative professionals both nationally and internationally.

Instrumentation. The researcher-designed survey instrument was used to identify the use of e-mail technologies by administrative professionals. The questionnaire included: 1) selected demographic information, and 2) use of e-mail. A 16-member panel of experts

validated the content of the survey instrument. Eight members were university professors who taught and published in the administrative area and taught courses using e-mail technologies. Eight members were administrative professionals who train in the computer technology area.

Data collection. The survey was included in the *OfficePRO* journal, which has both national and international subscribers. Readers were asked to fax or mail responses within the next three weeks. A follow-up reminder was placed in the next issue of the journal, requesting readers to fax or mail the completed surveys if they had not already done so.

Data analysis. Data were analyzed using frequencies and percents to describe the administrative professional on selected demographics and the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies for communications in the workplace. Chi-square was used to explore if there were significant differences between the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies age (age is categorical variable) and if there were significant differences between the administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies and the education level of the participants. The alpha level was set a priori at .05 for all inferential tests.

## Findings

Research question 1 provided a demographic profile of the 314 administrative professional participants. The demographic profile included gender, age, educational level, and company location. Of the participants, 99% (n= 311) were female and in the age categories as follows; 33% (n=103) <39, 32% (n=72) 40-49, and 36% (n=112) were 50 plus. Of the administrative assistants, 57% (n=183) had a high school education and 43% (n=183) had a college degree. The individuals were located in both US (n=288, 92%) and international (n=26, 8%) locations.

Research question 2 identified the use of e-mail by administrative professionals. The majority indicated that e-mail was available to them at work. Over 90% indicated that their supervisor *expected* them to use e-mail, with the main purposes for internal communications (97.2%) and external communications (76%). Approximately 80% had received instruction on how to use e-mail, primarily through in-house training. The vast majority use e-mail at work, with almost all (96%) indicating this use is on a daily basis. Respondents indicated their highest correspondence was with co-workers and supervisors (97%), followed by business associates (82%), and friends and relatives (72%). E-mail was used for international communications in over 40% of the cases.

Research question 3 identified any significant differences between administrative professionals' age and use of e-mail technologies. There were two areas of statistically significant differences. Individuals in the 40 years of age category and above age used e-mail at work significantly more than individuals who were 39 years of age or younger. Respondents aged 50 or older were significantly less likely to e-mail friends and/or relatives at work than those aged 49 or younger.

Research question 4 identified any significant differences between administrative professionals' educational level and use of e-mail technologies. There were three areas of statistically significant differences. Respondents who held high school degrees or certificates were significantly more likely to have e-mail available at their work, indicated that their supervisor expected them to use e-mail communications, and used e-mail at work than those who had a college degree.

## Implications

By identifying administrative professionals' use of e-mail technologies, implications can be made for supervisors and teachers of future administrative professionals.

1. The results of research question 1 indicate that administrative professionals are using e-mail technologies, but not as productively as they could be. Supervisors of administrative professionals and computer educators need to stress the importance of not using e-mail on the job to communicate with friends and family (unproductive), and to stress other important uses of e-mail, such as international communications. Computer use policies should be developed and implemented.
2. Research questions 2 and 3 indicate that there are some differences in e-mail use in relation to age and level of education. Supervisors and computer educators should be aware that younger aged employees are more likely to use e-mail unproductively during work. Computer educators need to stress to students that they will be expected to use e-mail technologies correctly and productively for business communications in the workplace. Supervisors need to address e-mail issues through new employee training and written policies.

## Recommendations for Future Research

In view of the results from this study, the following research is recommended:

1. To address the research questions, this study gathered information from administrative professionals. Further research should be conducted with business and computer teachers at the secondary and postsecondary level to identify if and how e-mail technologies are taught.
2. This study should be replicated in five years to again assess the type of e-mail use by administrative professionals in the field, and to determine if e-mail is being used productively and efficiently as a tool for business communications.

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