

Developing A Relationship Centred Communication Framework For Email Selection And Usage – A Literature Review

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New connections are proposed between the existing underpinning concepts used to explain email usage and, centred on relationship, to suggest a new communication theory. The theory is used to explain how waste may be reduced by eliminating inappropriate use of email. The impact of recent research on the theory of media richness is explored and new conclusions are drawn on the importance of relationship in selecting communication media. Relationship is linked with organisational culture, for the first time, to demonstrate how shared cultures may impact upon the appropriateness of different communication media. Analysis of the Transmission Model of communication is used to judge whether 'noise' should be considered as a conceptual construct permeating communication and, linked with richness, relationship and organisational culture, in affecting communication choice. When relationship, as a situational determinant is taken into account, the importance of Contingency Theory in providing a structure upon which a relationship based model emerges is demonstrated. Relationship is prioritised as a criterion, which differs considerably from earlier research and helps the user to find alternatives to email. Several other criteria are identified which are contingent upon and help to simplify the use of the proposed model. This theoretical model provides a means to reduce waste and, therefore, unnecessary cost, by lowering the number of emails circulating thereby cutting the time spent on their generation and subsequent response.

Field of Research: Management

1. Introduction

Early comments by Bengston (1980) focused on the hope that email would offer a greatly improved communication service for organisations than those in use by increasing speed and reducing cost. As a result the uptake of email as a means of communication in business grew rapidly. These benefits were still recognised some years later by Holliday (1999), Russell and Cohen (1997) and Yu and Yu (2001), who further investigated the flexibility, wide reach and reduced cost as being primary benefits and therefore reasons for adopting email systems.

Bengston (1980) did recognise that there were likely to be issues related to the uptake of email systems, especially surrounding management of the use of email within organisations. These issues would include email overload phenomenon, lack of clear understanding of message intent, negative reactions to message content, abuse of email systems, electronic bullying and harassment and users opting out of

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the system entirely. These views were also taken by Denning (1982), Hiltz and Turoff (1985) and Whittaker & Sidner (1996), and Whitaker et al (2006). Despite recognition of the issues surrounding email usage over a 26 year period, little evidence exists to demonstrate that the issues of email selection have been actively tackled, or solved.

During a 2010 case study, Silverstone (2010), observed a time cost of £1.2 million generated by staff using email. Added to other costs this represents a serious concern about a system that is meant to save money. During this study, 52.5% of the respondents felt that some of their time was being wasted through the use of email. Reasons for this included duplication of messages, inappropriate content, irrelevant messages, poorly constructed messages that required further clarification and examples of management through the use of email.

Little evidence exists to suggest that these issues have been either recognised or addressed which represents a considerable problem in ensuring effective use of email communications. Theories and practical solutions, propose the reduction in email usage but do not provide effective guidance on how to select a suitable alternative based upon situational factors or guidance on how to identify situations where email is still a valid communication method. In an attempt to rectify this, central theories about email use and practical issues have been revisited to propose that a model be designed based upon relationship, to allow users to mitigate the most common issues and to use email where it is appropriate, and employ other methods where it is not. This approach is significantly different from others as it employs a multidimensional method to incorporate considerations made by authors and places the sender, rather than the recipient, at the centre of the process. As a conceptual paper, the method for devising the proposed model is based on a review of current literature rather than empirical research.

2. Literature Review and Discussion

The earliest consideration of email effectiveness in relation to other communication media is represented by Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft and Lengel 1986). Measures of uncertainty and ambiguity in message delivery were used to assess the effectiveness of the medium. The central concept of MRT is that uncertainty caused by lack of information and ambiguity caused by poor choice of medium need to be reduced to allow effective communication to occur in organisations. Based upon the theory, Daft and Lengel (1986) and later Rice and Shook (1990) suggested that email was one of the least rich and, therefore poorest, means of communication when feedback, cues, intent and language are taken into account. The key tenets of MRT are still employed by communication consultants today as evidenced by Tims (2011) who noted that advice to replace email with face to face communication where possible is still given.

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However, MRT has been widely discredited by authors such as Markus (1994), Fann and Smeltzer (1989) and Rice (1992). The conclusions drawn by Daft and Lengel (1986) were viewed as being methodologically flawed as they employed a positivist perspective, thus the influence of the individuals involved in the process was entirely ignored, reducing the process of communication media selection to a mechanistic one (Contractor and Eisenberg 1990).

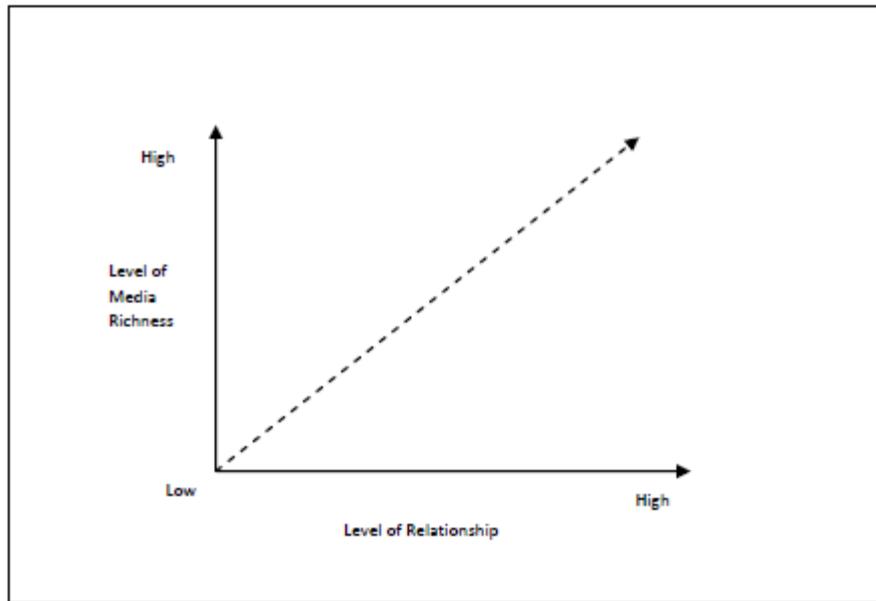
This view was supported by authors such as Fann and Smeltzer (1989), Allen (1994), Markus (1994) Ngwenyama (1997) and Dennis and Kinney (1998) who considered that as the theory did not reflect real situations it did not provide an appropriate structure to base media selection upon. Situational factors needed to be included. One of the key situational factors missing from MRT was that of relationship.

The findings of subsequent research provided the firmest foundation for media selection by considering relationship, as first suggested by Lee (1991, 1994). By including the impact of the human element it was considered that the role of the people involved had a greater impact than media selection itself. This suggestion is shown in Figure 1. Based upon these findings it is suggested that the role of relationship may work to mitigate some of the richness issues suggested by Daft and Lengel (1986) and help users to make more informed choices on communication media selection. Despite this suggestion, no work has been conducted to further this subject.

It is from this that the concept of subjective distance is proposed. Subjective distance proposes that a less rich means of communication becomes more suitable in a situation where the impact of reduced cues is mitigated by the relationship between the individuals involved. The analysis of equivocality cannot be made without considering how individual's opinions and behaviours impact upon this. Figure 1. A graphical representation of the suggestions made by Lee (1991, 1994) illustrating that as relationship increases, the potential richness of a given communication medium may increase.

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Figure 1: A graphical representation of the proposed relationship between level of relationship and level of perceived media richness.



Less rich communication methods lack important cues identified by Rutter and Stephenson (1979) including tone of voice, body language, facial expressions and, most importantly, the immediacy of feedback available. It is postulated that, as a result of a better relationship between the parties communicating, cues can be replaced with experience and the ability to pre-empt responses during conversations. An individual can read and interpret an email whilst imagining the sender passing the information face to face.

Building upon the work of Lee (1991, 1994), as relationship factors improve, the perceived richness of a means of communication will improve. MRT, in its original form, cannot allow this subjective interpretation of richness, as a perception, due to the methodological limitations.

As well as mitigating the factors that reduce richness and, therefore effectiveness of communication, subjective distance also allows users to make a more informed decision about situations where email would not be the most successful means of communication and alternatives should be considered.

Conclusions can also be drawn about the practical aspects derived from analysing MRT. As Trevino et al (1987) points out, the original benefit of email, as argued by Bengston (1980), managing time constraints and physical distance may be more relevant than richness. Physical distance will reduce the practicality of a face to face meeting in a lot of cases. This distance may also cross time zones making telephone conversations impractical. Once again, a subjective decision needs to be made to consider whether the payoff in richness is worth it for the perceived gain. Current

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theories of email selection do not allow for this to happen and tend to focus on the email itself rather than selecting alternatives.

Regardless of physical distance, if there is a large subjective distance then a richer means of communication may be necessary to communicate effectively. Over time, as the subjective distance closes, less rich means of communication may be employed as key cues can be assumed and that these assumptions will continue to become safer as the relationship builds.

However, time may not necessarily be saved by the originator in composing the message or the recipient in reading the message, time savings may be made in the delivery of the message over a long distance in a short space of time. A large subjective distance may increase the time required to undertake communication via a less rich means of communication. Ambiguity may be introduced requiring the recipient to seek further clarification of message contents and intent requiring the sender to provide further detail, increasing the time investment by both or multiple parties. A more detailed and formal message may help to reduce the impact but using a traditionally richer means of communication may be more suitable, an approach not considered by existing models of email use which emphasise black and white guidance rather than alternatives.

As subjective distance is reduced, the inherent assumptions that senders make would become safer meaning that ambiguity may be reduced in addition to time investment.

Subjective distance is a core situational factor that may impact upon other situational factors taken into consideration when undertaking media selection. A difficulty encountered is how to gauge the development of relationship. If relationship is viewed as shared experience, then relationship can be considered in three different ways, professional, personal and relationships driven by a shared culture.

Culture must be included as an important component in relationship. Personal and professional relationships have been suggested as means of substituting cues into less rich communication methods to improve their effectiveness by reducing ambiguity. However, a shared culture can create a reduced subjective distance by identifying and considering common factors, an approach not considered by existing email communication models.

Huczynski and Buchanan (2001) suggested that culture hinges upon shared values and beliefs. Trice and Beyer (1984) considered the shared history, ceremonies and rites as important components. Analysing these viewpoints can provide insights into the role of culture within organisations.

At a macro level, organisational culture impacts upon workers. The organisation's legacy will draw workers into the culture, whilst individuals will impact upon this over

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time, allowing components to become entrenched. Examples of these include acronyms and views on the usage of technologies such as email. Therefore, a degree of commonality can be assumed within the organisation. All individuals will possess certain reference points that are the same. Whilst this does exist at the macro level (whole organisation or sector level), it is suggested that it will exist much more strongly at a micro level, by individuals within the same department or working group.

This idea is furthered by Manley (2000) who identified that different subcultures exist within an organisation. Subcultures may interpret overall priorities in a different way depending on their values and beliefs. Additionally, these subcultures may possess a more detailed set of language components and dynamics of interaction. Different practices, values and rituals may also exist, impacting on communication.

Within subcultures it is proposed that a better relationship and, therefore, reduced subjective distance can be assumed. Expectations relating to communication will be similar, therefore a less rich means of communication may be viewed as richer and vice versa. Subcultures may also impact upon perception of overload therefore strengthening the position that subjective distance is a key factor when considering the selection of an appropriate communication method.

Subjective distance can have an impact on the considerations of physical distance, current and future time constraints as well as the requirement for message clarification. Further issues that may also be mediated by relationship are immediacy of response and the relationship between sender and recipient behaviour including suitability of content and comfort levels.

The theory of Noise, as initially suggested by Shannon and Weaver (1949), and the concept of Overload, as suggested in the first instance by Denning (1982) were explored. The findings from the investigation of both Noise and Overload suggest that interference can be introduced into the communication process either by the inappropriate selection of method, given the content and nature of the recipient, or by inappropriate use or overuse of a method leading to overload.

These issues may be mitigated by the role of relationship. Interference should be viewed as a situational determinant affecting the selection of communication media. Issues of a subjective nature are introduced through interference to supplement the more objective considerations already discussed in relation to subjective distance.

Noise theory introduced the idea of a physical interference as a means of reducing communication effectiveness. What can be demonstrated through the exploration of work by such authors such as Carey (1989), Neisser (1983) and Orlikowski (1992) is that noise may be viewed as conceptual as well as physical.

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Considering noise as a concept, introduces it at any point within the communication process, an assertion not made in any other theory relating to email usage. The conception of the message, language, delivery method, decoding and understanding can all be influenced by noise. Each of these may be affected by the relationship that the sender shares with the recipient. Conception should be driven by identification of and with the recipient. Language should match the needs of the recipient. Delivery method should also meet these needs to ensure that decoding and understanding are as intended. Recipient focus is unique to the theory proposed here.

Therefore, the choice of communication method may have an impact upon the conception of the message as well as the language used or content. For example, a message containing a formal disciplinary notice would not be transmitted via email under normal conditions. As such the language used would avoid the netspeak that has developed as an accepted form of communication via email. Similarly if the message was changed to make it suitable for email then it may not convey the correct message, introducing noise. A reduced subjective distance would allow the sender to make a more informed choice about how appropriate a communication medium may be for a given subject or content.

Additionally, the receiver would not necessarily be responsive to the message if delivered through an inappropriate medium such as in the examples demonstrated by Taylor et al (2004). Delivering the formal disciplinary via email may generate a negative response from the recipient, altering their ability to interpret the content correctly, possibly damaging any relationship that exists.

Noise has been illustrated as more than physical interference created by the communication method. However, as a concept, noise may be introduced anywhere in the communication process. The selection of the method may impact upon the chance of noise being introduced. The potential for noise introduction can be mitigated by a reduced subjective distance enabled by a good relationship.

Supporting the exploration of Noise is the concept of Overload and Email Overload theory. The effects of overload as well as investigations of appropriate coping methods throughout the literature by authors such as Denning (1982), Hiltz and Turoff (1985) and Ingham (2005) are considered. The implications of poorly managed overload can have a further detrimental effect on communication. Additionally, the responsibility for overload needs to be spread between the recipient and their coping strategies and the sender and their choice of communication method. Balancing these can be assisted by a good relationship. The sender will be better able to consider the needs of the recipient and pre-empt the development of overload and the recipient's ability to cope if the subjective distance is reduced by a good relationship.

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Denning (1982), suggested that email would not replace other means of communication, it would supplement them and increase the volume as a result. Therefore, the need to manage the use of email is an important part of email overload theory. Better relationships will allow for better management by senders understanding the best method of communicating with recipients.

Ingham (2005) considered the effects of email overload which included poor response to the use of email as well as potential for a wholesale withdrawal from the system if the user felt that they were being excessively loaded. These effects can be applied to any communication medium suggesting that the overuse can have a detrimental effect on the response the user has to the communication medium. Once again, an improved relationship would allow the sender a better understanding of how the recipient would respond to a communication medium.

To manage the possible effects of overload, theorists discussed the need for a multifaceted approach where the systems were refined to allow the user to make better use of them (Jackson et al 2003). The users need to be educated and encouraged to make better use of the improved systems to manage their load, (Denning 1982, Hiltz and Turoff 1985, Whittaker and Sidner 1996 and Whitaker et al 2006) and that users should be mindful of the possible impact upon recipients.

In order to achieve better management of email load, it is essential to guide users to manage their load and to be considerate of their actions on the load of others. It is also suggested, as a result of the theories explored, that a non-productive method of managing email load may be to offload and spread it to others. Whilst other strategies suggested are positive management techniques, encouraging users to deal with their message load whilst being mindful of their sending habits, offload is the opposite. It would allow users to reduce their loading by moving it to other people. All of these considerations may be subsumed by the relationship based approach.

Not only is offload a non-proactive management technique, as the user is not taking responsibility for the outcomes, it will actively increase the load of other users. Reduced subjective distance may negate the potential of offload occurring by avoiding the circumstances that lead to it.

The communication load of the sender and that of others should be the prime factor in selecting a means of communication. For example, an email used in a situation where it is not warranted, to communicate a complicated set of instructions, or where the message is poorly constructed, may generate responses which would increase the load upon the original sender. By considering relationship, these factors can be mitigated.

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The selection of communication medium, based upon the habits of the sender and the recipient, may reduce the loading upon both the sender and recipient. By avoiding the negative implications of overload, users may enjoy a better experience when communicating, improving communication. What is currently missing is the decision making process by which users decide upon alternatives in a given situation, considering both their own needs and those of the recipients.

To ease the overall decision making process and to make the decision about which means of communication to use, contingency theory provides an effective means of viewing the different factors that may impact upon a decision.

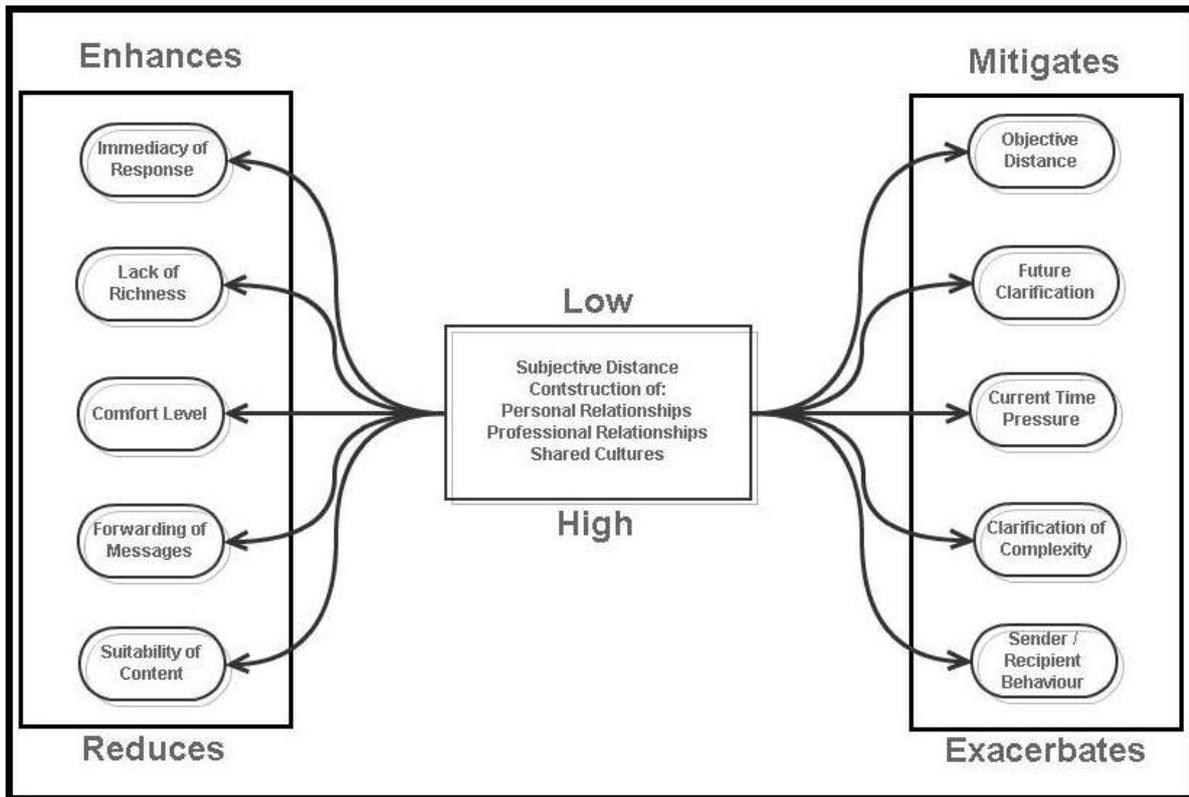
Considering different situational determinants, and the impact of relationship on these, would allow users to make a more informed decision upon which communication method to employ. Contingency theory also suggests that the user would require a set of guidelines upon which their decision can be made. The decision itself and the person making it are the key components in using a contingency approach in this way. As such the individual and the process cannot be divorced, further implication for MRT, as originally proposed, as the approach considered the media in isolation from the users.

Contingency approaches tend to emphasise the use of a multidimensional approach such as that proposed by Van den Hooff (2005). This approach allows each contingency to be viewed as being on an equal footing and also allows the user to tackle the issue from different angles. However, it does not provide a strong structure for users to follow. In developing a means for selecting an alternative to email communication, further work would need to be undertaken to establish whether a multidimensional approach would be appropriate.

From the review undertaken, the following model represented by Figure... is proposed. Figure 2 hypothesises that where subjective distance is low, a positive impact may be seen on situational factors that may enhance communication and a mitigating effective may be seen on those that damage the communication process. The reverse of this may also be observed. Further research into the applicability of this model to areas other than email usage should be undertaken to assess the transferability of the recommendations.

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Figure 2: A relationship centred multidimensional approach to enhancing email communication.



3. Conclusion

Theories about email usage have been explored and from these certain situational factors have been derived that have an impact, not just on how email is used, but also on whether alternative means of communication should be sought in given situations based upon interpretation of these factors.

The implications of physical distance and time have been considered to show that the original assertions that email would reduce time and cost may not be accurate. There are situations in which using email to attempt to achieve these may be damaging to communication by reducing the effectiveness of the communication and introducing interference by way of noise or overload phenomena. The potential mediating influence of relationship has been shown here to illustrate how a less rich means of communication may be rendered more effective or, despite this, may urge the adoption of an initially seemingly more time consuming method such as face to face communication that would ultimately reduce time and cost implications in the future.

To achieve this, an improved relationship has been considered to clarify the complexity within communication and pre-empt the need for clarification of message intent through the substitution of the cues that are lacking in email communication.

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By the same consideration, the knowledge of the recipient borne by an improved relationship may cause the sender to choose an alternative method of communication despite the enhancing effect that an improved relationship has upon traditionally less rich means of communication.

Further subjective considerations such as users comfort level, their behaviour and how suitable content is for transmission by a given medium is also affected by relationship. Despite the mediating effect of relationship on less rich communication methods, if the recipient will not respond positively then it must be substituted for an alternative. The same can be said of their behaviour and potential response to the content of the communication.

To implement this approach, a staged, multidimensional approach needs to be devised and adopted to allow users to measure the impact of the subjective distance between themselves and the recipient. However, what is clear is that relationship pervades and impacts upon all aspects of communication in the workplace.

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