Introduction
Email has become an ubiquitous communication technology in the workplace. It has overtaken the phone and face-to-face contact and has, in many organisations, supplanted the printed memo and file. “Email is an absolute necessity to conduct business in today’s environment” (Cavanagh 2004 p3). Its ability to disseminate information easily and quickly makes email one of the most readily accepted activities in today’s office (Merrier & Dirks 1997). It cannot simply be seen as a technology – “it affects communication mode or style” (Minsky & Martin 1999 p200). However, to many people, email is as much a curse as a blessing, with the messages that pile up when they are sick or on leave, the bullying or thoughtless or badly constructed emails that require attention, the seeping of personal emails into their working day and the temptation to check work emails when they are at home. We are still grappling with how to manage email, despite the technological solutions offered and almost 20 years of email in the workplace. Email is as much a “social phenomenon as it is a technological one” (Carr 1998 p12) and its problems require some attention by managers. On the whole, we still do not recognise that “email is work, important work, which requires time and know-how to use it effectively” (Munter, Rogers & Rymer 2003 p26).

This paper brings together some of the previous research of other authors and experiences of professional staff in three Australian universities to explore the issues around how email has transformed the workplace and how it affects peoples’ working day. The paper suggests some practical ways in which we may improve our management of email.

Context
There have been numerous studies of the use of email in the workplace in various contexts, including in universities, and across Europe, the UK, Canada and the USA. These studies explore why email seems to create so many problems for the workplace, while at the same time, provides elegant solutions to communication needs (Adams, Todd & Nelson 1993, Cavanagh 2004, Day & Day 2002, Fallows 2002, Farhoomand & Drury 2002, Jackson, Burgess & Edwards 2006, Ku 1996, Lazar, Jones & Schneiderman 2006, Merrier & Dirks 1997, Minsky & Martin 1999, Romm & Pliskin 1997, Sipior & Ward 1999, Spence 2002, Sullivan 1995, Van den Hoof 2005). In 2000, Laura Spence (2002) conducted a study in the UK, arguing that higher education institutions are important in the area of computer-mediated communications as they are critical to the development of the networks and mediums and are characterised by widespread use of email systems. The project was undertaken because there was concern that there was “insufficient consensus on how emails should be used within the organization” (ibid p14). While it was the most widely used medium in the university, there were no conventions around how to use it.
Many of the studies above consider how employees perceive email and how they deal with the avalanche of emails they get each day. The main issues raised by these studies are described below.

**What’s the problem with email?**
A number of the problems listed here will no doubt be familiar. There was certainly much agreement about the issues identified by many of the authors above and the participants in this study.

**Purpose and nature of email**
The purpose of email seems to be a mixture of business and personal (Knox 2006). This results in confusion for employees. Do they adopt the chatty personal style they might use with their family and friends or do they adopt a more formal business approach akin to the memo? In thinking about the simple business of a salutation – should we use none, just the recipient’s name, or if using a salutation, is it ‘Dear….’, ‘Hi…..’ or something else? Each organisation seems to have its own set of unwritten rules about this, but it reflects the simple confusion that arises over the nature of email as a communication medium. A study conducted in 1999 found that 40% of email correspondence in the workplace is not work related. Email is used for multiple types of tasks including “circulating documents, requesting information and having brief conversations at the users [sic] convenience.”(Knox 2006 p2).

The mixed purpose, both impersonal and efficient (business documents) and casual and personal (emails from friends and family), results in employees having a misunderstanding of email functions in the workplace (Knox 2006, Spence 2002). Email is used as a conduit and record-keeper for all types of discourse and has blurred the line between conversational and written communication, meaning that writing has become more like speech (Pratt, 2006). The informality which creeps into business email can lead to reckless communication which results in poor behaviour in the workplace (Knox 2006). Even ten years ago, while email was seen as most appropriate for information exchange, it was acknowledged to frequently involve socio-emotional material (Ku 1996).

While some of these confusions of purpose exist with other communication media (we might phone a friend or family member from work and we get unsolicited snail mail selling us things), the email medium operates in such a way that it is extremely easy for advertisers to find our address, it is easy and cheap to send broadcast messages and it is much easier to engage with friends and family without prying ears listening in. “Email displays unique characteristics which allow it to cross over traditional boundaries between paper and electronic media” (Sullivan 1995 p52). It combines many of the low-involvement attributes of writing with high-involvement attributes such as interactivity. Email provides the opportunity to communicate at a distance, both geographical and in time, and makes it easier for organisations to access and process information (Adams et al 1993, Minsky & Martin 1999). Even though email has been in the workplace for twenty years, we still use it inappropriately in place of conversation (Cavanagh, 2004).

This confusion of purpose is also partly at the heart of another problem which is how work is creeping into our personal time, explored further below.
Management of email

The management of email appears to be one of the major problems associated with it, often leading to perceptions of increased stress. Pratt (2006) suggests that the managerial skills required to deal with this communication tool are still in their infancy. This has contributed to employees working long hours, experiencing increased stress, spending personal time engaged in work activities, and decreased productivity. The medium, by its very nature, invites information overload. Rather than spam email being the problem, it was those emails “we actually feel obliged to read” (Pratt 2006 p4) which create the stress. In fact, most of the filtering techniques have become so sophisticated that in my own university, in one week, 93% of incoming messages are filtered out as spam or from an unreliable source. In general, people are overwhelmed by the volume, lose important items and feel pressured to respond quickly (Jackson et al 2006). The problem of “information overload” can variously mean excessive volume, difficulty of managing email, the relevance or importance of email, lack of time to understand it, and multiple sources from which email can emanate (Farhoomand & Drury 2002).

In a study conducted in the USA, it turned out it was the nature of some emails that was the source of annoyance: rambling or unclear messages, trivial messages, misuse of the “cc” and “reply all”, unclear subject lines and emails that were better suited to conversation. Denning (2002) estimates it takes 30 minutes just to decide what to do with 100 emails, let alone how long it takes to actually deal with them. Consequently, email plays a prominent role in negative feelings about time shortage (ibid). Similarly, Weber (2004) points to the need to read, respond, decide and file every message, added to the business of composing a reply. One study estimated that responding to 50-75 emails (the average number received per day in the study) takes around 2 hours, or 25% of an employee’s day (Day and Day 2002). Another study showed that 20% of employees spent 3-4 hours a day on email, 10% spent more than half their day, and worst of all, 74% said they checked work email at home, blurring the line between home and work life (Pratt 2006, Lazar et al 2006).

“Every email message, phone call or web page link is a request for our time” (Denning 2002 p15) and we spend more and more time simply taking notice of these requests. The main issues can be characterised as recipients feeling powerless to stop time-wasting messages, employees working long hours to manage email and organisations not doing enough to reduce the volume of email (Cavanagh 2004). In some quarters, the stress has become email fatigue, although this is certainly not universal. In one US study of 2,500 workers, 78% said that email had not affected their working hours and 60% received no more than ten emails a day (Fallows 2002). Clearly these workers were not situated at a university.

Poor Behaviour and Email Bullies

A number of authors identify the nature of email being such that it encourages email bullies (Knox 2006, Markus 1994, Romm & Pliskin 1999, Weber 2004, Zabrosky 2004). Its informality often leads to reckless communication including derogatory statements, circulating off-colour jokes and pictures, and sometimes, bullying (Knox 2006). Its impersonal nature psychologically allows people to engage in behaviour they might not do in face-to-face interactions (Zabrosky 2004). Many believe there has been a decline in personal contact as a result of email, with some arrogant or
aggressive individuals using it to protect themselves in inappropriate communication behaviours (Weber 2004).

In one study the habit of copying managers into complaints that would be better dealt with face-to-face was raised and the problem of “flaming” – responding angrily without careful consideration - was clearly an issue (Spence 2002). The electronic world can be viewed as lacking “social glue”, although there is a counter argument which says it also allows for the inclusion of the shy (ibid). The existence of flaming suggests email sometimes provokes interactions not consistent with the norms of other personal interactions (Sipior & Ward 1999).

The lack of extra clues in email can also cause confusion for the recipient. The situational context cues that are missing include hierarchy, position, status, affiliations, relationships and personal meaning. The sense that email is ephemeral provides a greater freedom in expression, even though it might be going out to a wider audience. It can foster detachment and diminishes ethical awareness. And without contextual clues, receivers can easily misinterpret communications (ibid).

At its worst, this sort of interaction can become very political within the organisation and email “wars” can be very hard to control (Carr 1998). Email can be used to garner support from colleagues in confrontations with management and can be used as much for misinformation as collaboration (Romm & Pliskin 1997). An alternative view to this is that email affords the ability to communicate without non-verbal cues, creating an easy way to resolve conflict (Ku 1996). It is sometimes seen as less intimidating than a phone call and can be viewed as a status equaliser (Adams et al 1993).

Finally, email can be “cast as a more cowardly method for communication” and “is being used more as a weapon to be expeditious rather than a tool to enhance communication and information flow” (Cavanagh 2004 p15). In Fallows’ (2002) study, 90% of her participants identified harassment of co-workers through email as a problem. Clearly some behavioural protocols are necessary around the use of email in the workplace.

Lack of Rules
All communication media have rules, both stated and unstated, around their use. Most organisations have clear rules about how memos and letters should look, how they are to be addressed and so on. Most of us are aware of the unwritten rules about how we perform communication tasks on the phone and in person, and we are often shocked when someone does not understand those rules, or breaks them deliberately. Email, being a relatively new communication medium, still seems to lack some fundamental rules which we can all follow (Pratt 2006). Some organisations now mandate how staff sign off and what information needs to be at the bottom of the signature. However, few rules exist about how the salutation should look, or what the subject line should contain, or when and how staff should use the copy line.

The habit of copying others into emails when it is not necessary is often raised in the literature (No author 2004, Cavanagh 2004, Jackson et al 2006) as are problems with poorly written emails which are either too curt and explain nothing or too long and rambling (No author 2004, Cavanagh 2004, Fallows 2002). The use of jargon, poor punctuation, garbled syntax and tortured grammar are common in email which is
often characterised by literary sloppiness and inattention to detail. The more time-consuming email becomes, the more people take shortcuts and language becomes compressed (Crainer & Dearlove 2004). Sometimes when an email requires action, it is not clear what action is expected. Too many emails come just for information or are not properly targeted (Jackson et al 2006).

In one study, some participants felt that you do not have to worry about spelling or grammar in email (Spence 2002), yet the existence of poor spelling and grammar in email is often cited as a source of annoyance for recipients. “Rules for correct word usage, punctuation….slander, illegalities, honest representation, pornography, crude language seem to be different and unclear when people use email to communicate” (Flanagan 1999, p116). It is suggested that the rise of SMS is going to make all of these problems worse (Crainer & Dearlove 2004). Added to the literary problems, there are further issues which are the result of overuse of the copy mechanism, reply all and distribution lists as well as the inclusion of thankyous, acknowledgements and repeated messages (Cavanagh 2004). Later in this paper, we will see that a set of rules around email communication would help reduce some of these problems.

Changes to the workplace
The email story is not entirely problematic. There are a number of positive effects of email in the workplace, in particular the ability to communicate asynchronously, the ability to communicate with multiple recipients easily and cheaply, the ability to access the communication medium at the time of your choice and the fact that it does allow some shy individuals to join in a ‘conversation’ they might not be able to in a face-to-face setting. In a study of 1,200 executives in the US, it was found that more than half spent at least 2 hours per day answering email at work, and 30% spent an additional hour or more at home (Crainer & Dearlove 2004).

Managers have focused on the benefits of technology, the fast efficient and cheap means of communication which allows employees to share ideas and documents and which supports teamwork, flexibility and speed. One of the reasons email has succeeded as a communication medium is its ability to overcome barriers of time and geography. Over time, users will utilise the medium for a broader range of tasks and will see an effect both in terms of efficiency and changes in the way the organisation operates (Van den Hoof 2005). “A learning process in email use developed in which users learned to use the opportunities that email offers in ways that better fit their demands” (ibid, p142). However, some research suggests email is open to “political” manipulation (Carr 1998). “Email introduces an open, democratic and largely unregulated communications system into organizations”(ibid p12). Email can turn a very large organisation into a small village where “information travel[s] rapidly and [is] accessible to all” (Romm & Pliskin 1997 p222).

The issues listed above – confusion of purpose of email, management of email, email bullying, lack of rules and changes to interactions in the workplace have all been explored by various authors. The next part of this paper will largely support these as the main issues surrounding email through a study of employee experiences undertaken in 2005.
This study
As part of a broader study on the experiences of professional staff in universities, a number of questions about the use of technology and in particular, email, were explored. Professional staff in various sections of the three universities in South Australia were interviewed, using a series of open-ended questions aimed at achieving a rich description of their experiences in their work places. The 37 participants in this study were evenly distributed between administrative units and academic units and ranged in age from early 20’s to late 50’s. The majority (29) of participants were female, but this generally reflects the gender balance in professional staff. It is important to note in the context of this paper that no technical staff were interviewed. Also, the seniority of staff was mixed, from HEW3 to HEW10+.

Use of IT systems in student interactions
A number of participants alluded to the work they do which involves computers, and particularly email. In many universities it has become explicitly the main method of communication with students. While email seems an excellent medium to contact student groups, in one study it was felt that many students did not receive the communications (Spence 2002). Universities used to mail out hard-copy results notices, letters of notification and invoices and have long queues at enrolment as students filled out printed forms and got them signed by academics who had to be available for days on end at enrolment time. Now students are specifically told that email is the main means of communication and it becomes their responsibility to check their student email regularly. Young people see email as the most natural form of communication, exemplified by the result of one study which showed that 96% of applicants to Harvard chose to have their admissions decisions emailed to them (Fallows 2002). In many institutions, students now can only get their results online and enrolment queues are a thing of the past as students can enrol themselves online from anywhere at almost any time.

Administrative staff who used to spend weeks at the beginning of each academic year data-entering enrolment forms and creating files for each student are now available to give enrolment advice and help students enrol through online chat rooms and on the phone. This mirrors Castell’s (1996) observation of changes in the insurance industry as a result of the use of information technology. The staff involved in enrolment have now taken on other administrative duties as the need for them to be involved in the enrolment process has declined. The admissions activity which used to involve many staff, both academic and administrative for days on end over January, has been codified and automated – the academic decisions about who gets into each program largely now being made by computer according to a set of rules which only has be thought about once rather than for each individual applicant. These general changes to the way work is conducted in universities is mirrored in the shift from paper based communication to electronic.

Attitudes to email
Participants in this study were given free range to talk about email in any way they wanted. The majority of participants who bothered to pass judgement on email were largely positive about it, with only four seeing it completely negatively. There were a number for whom email was so ubiquitous, they did not even talk about it. In the distribution of responses, there are some interesting things to note. Those who did not bother to talk about email were, in general the younger participants. But most
interestingly, of those who chose not to talk about email, 10 out of 12 were from the only institution which had a single email system across the institution for over 6 years and which had things like group lists and calendar linked to the email system. In this institution, email had become so embedded into the working landscape that most participants did not think it worth talking about.

There were a number of participants for whom email was neither wonderful or awful – they either did not care much or saw it as both good and bad:

*Email. I find it has both positive and negative impact on my work.....I think it just created and escalated work, crises, drama in a way that was unbelievable.*

But from the same participant:

*I do find that email helps my work in an enormous number of ways – it allows me to have conversations and discussions about things without moving from my office.*

A number of participants described email as the “bane of everyone’s life”.

Some participants valued the improvements email made to their work. This was from a participant whose office floor was littered with pieces of paper and working materials.

*I have a regular series of events which occur annually – there’s little change in those things and there will be an email which I will have sent out to a group and I can just bring that up, alter it and send it out again. That’s just the quickest easiest thing. I reckon the filing has been absolutely fantastic and as you see, I don’t file particularly well when it comes to hard copies.*

A few participants were part-time workers. They were frequently positive about email because it allowed people to contact them when they weren’t there. However, on those days it also piled up.

*Email has increased. I work part-time....and I’ll come back to 50 or 60 emails. Students have stopped dropping in as much – I think they use email. In a way that’s good because it means that they’re not constantly chasing you and I try to keep up to date with my emails....but sometimes if you’re really flat out, email is really difficult – it puts a lot of pressure on you.*

The asynchronicity of email was seen as one of its most positive features. The ability to choose when one engages in email interaction not only provides a powerful self-management tool, but also allows for remote communication that took weeks before email existed.

Email also allows for people to organise themselves and their communications in a much more systematic way. This includes being able to choose when one engages in communication, how one engages in it, being able to think more carefully about what is going to be said, and being able to contact multiple recipients in one communication:
In terms of getting information quickly and efficiently from all sorts of sources, certainly email has been fantastic.

The costs are that you know who a person is, but you don’t know them by face, but it saves time – you can read things when you need to and when you want to.

…..some of the academics who you don’t see very often, you can send them an email and it will sit there until they open it and you can get on with other stuff and it will come back when they’ve seen it and they’ve got your answer. It’s a very impersonal way of nagging.

So, it would seem that attitudes to email vary enormously and many people are quite ambivalent about it. While it clearly provides some improvements to work practices, there are a number of problems associated with it. These are explored in the next section.

The ability of email to keep a record of transactions was appreciated by a number of participants. This was particularly the case for staff who dealt with students or who were in areas where the work has the propensity to be contentious such as Human Resources, or people providing policy advice. In the first two quotes below (as in a number of other instances) the participants refer to email as a “conversation”. This raises the issue of the lack of clarity of purpose of email in the workplace.

What I like about it is it keeps a record of what you have said and what the other person has heard and if, for some reason, once I’ve done that they then go “hang on a moment I didn’t think we had agreed to that”, we can pick up the misunderstanding much quicker and I also have a record of the conversation.

Because I come from a complaints and advocacy background, I like things in writing. I want a record of the conversation.

It’s a very good means of communication and also a great record of what has gone on, so I keep emails as documentation and record of what has taken place between a student and myself.

I learnt to keep every single email that I’ve ever sent to somebody for the last four years now. Being an admin staff member, I’ve learnt that you’ve got to make sure you cover yourself with physical proof that you’ve done something because often your word isn’t enough.

If every staff member kept every email they had sent and received the cost of maintaining the systems would be out of proportion to the benefits gained. This raises the issue of the need for management protocols around email.
Management of email
One of the main problems raised by participants was the lack of protocols around management of email. It would seem from this study that some of those who experience difficulty with email are people who are struggling with finding an effective way to manage it:

Email .... takes so much time.....it’s not unusual for people to have 100-200 items sitting in their inbox. I’ve talked to the admin staff and ....one’s got 50 unopened items and 200 opened.

It should be said that this was someone who, in the interview, had revealed that she had a recent bout of illness and had come back to what was clearly a very large amount of email that had been unmanaged in her absence.

Email sucks. Email is this organism that cannot be controlled and you just get hit from so many directions that I find it a nightmare.

I think everyone would echo the same sentiment that the amount of email just takes up so much time and all the rubbish that you get, for example, things that go to all staff, but you just flick them. To me, email has increased everyone’s workload.

Many participants touched on the difficulty of managing the quantity of email. This is clearly an issue which needs consideration by managers, particularly as everyone tries to cope with email as the main communication medium in the workplace. Added to this is a pressure to respond to emails in a short timeframe.

I look at email every half an hour and try and deal with them as they come in.....I sometimes find that at 5 o’clock at night I’ve still got emails there from the day before and people are saying “Oh haven’t you got my email, you haven’t responded yet”

Some participants suggested that this pressure was self-inflicted, but clearly a number of people feel it acutely.

Some participants had quite sophisticated ways for managing their own email – more than one person tried to deal with every email only once – deal with it, file it, reply to it or delete it. If it was something that was going to take longer, it went into a “to do list”. One of the participants who did this said she “learnt to be really tough”. Another also tried to clear email every morning and evening. A few participants mentioned that if they stopped being so systematic, email quickly got out of control. Finally, a number saw email as a means of keeping a record of what they had and had not done, of all their communications and it acted as a surrogate filing system.

Changes to workplace interaction
A number of participants perceived changes to interactions in the workplace as a result of online activity and, in particular, email.
During enrolment, I was getting over 100 emails per day during the first days of enrolment and physically that’s really hard and people can’t necessarily see that workload.

This was an issue raised by a number of participants. Previously they had lines of students at their door. It was clear to their managers what they were doing – they were providing advice to students and dealing with students’ problems. However, much of this work had shifted to email and now the staff were alone at a desk, no visible line of students, just hundreds of emails coming into their inbox. Their work had shifted from a public activity to a private activity and they felt under some pressure that now their managers questioned what it was they were doing. Their work had not disappeared – it had simply shifted mode. It is now the case that much of some peoples’ work is achieved through email. One participant estimated that she did 80% of her interaction on email.

Participants were divided in their attitudes to email as a communication medium which had largely replaced other forms of communication. They talked about how email had changed the social landscape of the organisation. People no longer visited each others’ offices or engaged in the social chatter that a phone call generates, but rather sent each other emails. One participant bemoaned the fact that the staff in her area would engage in heated email debates with colleagues in the next office, copying in more and more people to garner support as the issue escalated. She finally went out to the protagonists and insisted that they sit in a room together and talk the issue out rather than continue the email exchange. The following are typical comments about how and why email has changed interaction in the workplace:

Email I think is really efficient and works quite well and it’s much quicker than visiting someone or phoning them. You don’t have to find their telephone number, if they don’t answer the phone, someone else does and you have to leave a whole message and they often don’t understand what you’re talking about.

As a person who’s never liked telephones, I find myself much more comfortable with email interaction. People say you can’t read what people are thinking from email – I disagree profoundly.

People within the university won’t ring you, they’ll just send you an email because it’s faster and they don’t have to deal with the chatter that’s associated with a social call.

I find that it gives me a chance to compose my thoughts a bit prior to contacting people – I think that’s really helpful. It’s kind of discreet I think. You’re not interrupted if you’re in the middle of something….like a phone call – you don’t get interrupted quite as much.

Most participants had clearly found, when using the phone or face-to-face, that there was a necessity to engage in social interaction when what they wanted was a quick business-like response. They saw the social interaction as an annoyance rather than recognising any of the social benefits it may have brought to the workplace. One participant said she only preferred the phone when she knew the relationship was
“reliable”. The quantity of communication has increased as a result of the ease of sending things by email and often the quality of that communication is questionable, as suggested by a participant who talked about spam email or the ease of sending a question to “25 people” because he could.

*I find that it’s frustrating where you should talk to people, you end up sending emails. You send out emails and people get the wrong end of the stick, including myself because otherwise you’ve got to write a full chapter to be able to cover all the potential misinterpretations that could occur.*

*It’s a great way to communicate – although sadly I think the assumption is that if you are sent an email, the expectation is that you respond, act or take in the information in that email on the day you receive it. I prefer to deal with people on the phone.*

Email, in every participants’ experience had become the main mode of communication in universities. It is now how people “converse” with each other and makes keeping in touch with remote colleagues (and friends) much easier. It has usurped the phone, much to many peoples’ apparent glee, and even face-to-face communication. Few participants bemoaned this loss of human contact, although one missed the morning tea and lunch time interactions (the loss of which he saw as driven by email and computers in general), and some found email’s informality disconcerting. Email provides a cheap and easy way for people to organise themselves, to keep accurate records and to share information of all descriptions but it has changed the way we interact, frequently making the workplace a less social environment.

**Poor behaviour and bullying**

Many participants felt email was often used inappropriately and that it was easy to get into misunderstandings. They identified that some people did not understand the effect of some of their email communication. A few found that the “tone” of email was sometimes problematic, one suggesting this could often be fixed by a phone call. Poor or bullying email behaviour, in fact was not an issue raised by many participants in this study. However, I have certainly experienced many examples of it in my time in universities. Some examples are: the student who sent many emails to senior people such as the VC, Head of Student Services and various university staff full of racial vilification and espousing the white supremacist view that the government and university were allowing Asian men in to take his job, university place and his women. The academic who, in the end, had access to the all faculty staff email list revoked because he intermittently sent emails which verged on defamatory and which were frequently personal and nasty about certain individuals. The student who hacked into the university’s email system and sent to a large number of staff a poster vilifying certain members of staff. And finally, the various students who use their university email to stalk and terrorise other students, and in some cases, staff members. All of these examples can be considered as bullying in one form or another and are a small example of how email can be abused in the workplace.

**Lack of rules for email**

Some participants felt that email created work for them. In particular the “cc” button is seen as problematic because people feel they have to read everything they are sent,
even though in many cases it is not necessary. A number of participants complained that they got a lot of rubbish over email, although when questioned, this was not spam, as one might expect, but things like “all-staff” emails. This mirrored the experience in other studies (Pratt 2006).

One participant felt that there are not “an effective set of regulatory protocols to govern some aspects of our communication”. In particular he pointed to the confusion from the formal memo to the chatty email. There were other participants who thought we needed a clearer set of protocols. One participant described how she sent an email about an issue which, in the reply was copied to another five people “so now five people are dealing with this case rather than one”. These long email trails involving numerous people did not help to get issues resolved according to this participant.

To resolve these various problems and issues it is suggested by a number of authors that each organisation needs to develop a set of protocols around the use of email. The suggestions below are an amalgam of a number of ideas from various authors on what these protocols might look like.

Suggested methods for managing email
A number of authors suggest that in general there needs to be a change of attitude to email and that it needs to be seen as more formal than is currently the case (Knox 2006, Pratt 2006, Spence 2002).

Firstly it is suggested that every organisation that relies on email as a communication medium needs to have policy about its use (different to IT acceptable use). People need to treat email as if it were a printed document – while it is not as formal as a memo, it can be equally binding. A tacit rule is, if you would not send it as a letter, don’t send it. It is also suggested that personal email be kept to a minimum and people should be made aware that the employer can monitor their email. As a general rule, “the level of civility required in email is no different from that which is expected in face-to-face exchanges” (Spence 2002 p49). It is also suggested that organisations should set up templates for formal communications which allow the extra clues we do not get now. There are also some automatic tools that can be installed which provide an initial prioritisation according to a person’s role. For instance if your role means that external or student email is more urgent than internal, you can set up a folder into which internal mail goes automatically. This means your inbox can receive your immediate attention and the rest get dealt with when time permits. Of course, if you are one of the lucky ones who has a personal assistant, they will be doing this level of prioritisation and filtering already (Farhoomand & Drury 2002).

It is clear that we need a set of protocols for two aspects of email – content and management (including sending, receiving and storing). Most of the issues raised in this paper would improve if people had a clear set of rules that members of the organisation followed.

Content of email
Some suggested rules governing the content of email are:

- Use effective subject lines – make sure it tells the recipients what the email is about – revise subject lines in reply emails to ensure they still describe the topic, as it changes.
The first sentence is the most important as a communication tool – remember the important information should be at the start.

- Get the message across clearly, concisely and succinctly – consider your audience – read your email as if you were them. Often the faster you compose and the less you edit, the slower it is for the reader.
- Write in short chunks with each new idea in a new paragraph – treat emails as if they were letters. This also makes it easier to skim.
- Compensate for the lack of non-verbal clues, keeping the communication reasonably formal and using polite terms and “softened” verbs – don’t make jokes or use informal idioms and eliminate emotion.
- Do not include rumour or innuendo or gossip – imagine if it was sent to the wrong person. Some sensitive issues should never be discussed on email.
- Minimise size and number of attachments

Management of email

Similarly, suggested rules governing the management of email are:

- Ask if the email is really necessary – email is not always the best form of communication – think twice before you hit send.
- Ask if it is targeted – select the distribution list before you compose to ensure that all recipients are taken account of in the composition.
- Revise emails before sending them.
- Don’t use any special graphics which only slow things down and make things more difficult – this includes using simple fonts and normal use of lower and upper case.
- Think twice before you send – if the subject matter is highly charged, wait a day before you send it – assume anything you write may end up in court or be read by your boss – avoid “flaming” at all costs.
- Manage the inbox – prioritise, read and answer on line without saving or printing and archive into specially developed files if necessary.
- If you can’t respond immediately, let the sender know when you will if it’s an important matter.
- Carefully consider who needs to see your message when you reply to an email – never automatically use the “reply all” – ensure every message is targeted.
- Check for incoming messages before you reply to ensure there is no more recent communication on the topic.

(Jackson et al 2006, Munter et al 2003)

There are also some suggestions for the management of the application itself:

- Turn off the new email alert (both dialogue box and sound).
- Set up the email inbox to display one sender, the subject and the first 3 lines of the message so you can determine what needs immediate attention.
- Set up the email application to check for email more infrequently – every 45 minutes is suggested – this reduces the sense of urgency.
- Train staff in how to prioritise and perform email “housework”.
- Use an automatic out of office if you are absent for any time and when you return, deal with the more recent emails first – older ones are likely to be less relevant after a passage of time.
- Trash all unimportant messages – the more you keep, the harder it is to find things.
- Remove your business email address from irrelevant lists
- Schedule your email use – don’t constantly check it, unless it is your job to do so.


Particular sorts of training are also suggested. The training should be focused not on technical issues, but exploring management issues with the participants. One study showed that with this sort of training, there was an improvement in how the group dealt with email, with 99% better use of the subject line and 95% better composed emails. On average it took less time to read and understand emails after training (Jackson et al, 2003).

Conclusion
This study confirms a number of findings in previous studies. Email as a communication medium in the workplace is, in 2008, still young enough to have some problems associated with its use. In particular they are a confusion of purpose and nature of the medium, how workers manage the communications, misuse of email to harass and bully coworkers, lack of rules associated with the use of the medium and the changes it has wrought to the workplace, in particular to worker interaction. This paper has also drawn together some strategies designed to combat some of these problems.

Some organisations use extreme strategies such as banning internal emails to encourage conversation (Spence 2002). In general, there are simple methods to improve the use of email, in particular creating folders and archiving email, deleting faster, checking less often, taking more time to compose good messages and simply sending fewer emails (which elicits fewer responses) (Cavanagh 2004). If all organisations developed policies around the use of email, not only around “acceptable” use, but also around the management of email, we might see some improvement in how people use email in the workplace and we might see less abuse of it.
References


Cavanagh, C.A. (2004) Email in the workplace: Coping with overload, unpublished paper provided by email from ccavangh@ivey.uwo.ca.


SUGGESTED RULES FOR IMPROVING MANAGEMENT OF EMAIL

Many of these rules can be implemented at the personal or workgroup level, but they are most effective if implemented at an organisation-wide level.

Content of email
Some suggested rules governing the content of email are:

- Use effective subject lines – make sure it tells the recipients what the email is about – revise subject lines in reply emails to ensure they still describe the topic, as it changes.
- The first sentence is the most important as a communication tool – remember the important information should be at the start.
- Get the message across clearly, concisely and succinctly – consider your audience – read your email as if you were them. Often the faster you compose and the less you edit, the slower it is for the reader.
- Write in short chunks with each new idea in a new paragraph – treat emails as if they were letters. This also makes it easier to skim.
- Compensate for the lack of non-verbal clues, keeping the communication reasonably formal and using polite terms and “softened” verbs – don’t make jokes or use informal idioms and eliminate emotion.
- Do not include rumour or innuendo or gossip – imagine if it was sent to the wrong person. Some sensitive issues should never be discussed on email.
- Minimise size and number of attachments

Management of email
Similarly, suggested rules governing the management of email are:

- Ask if the email is really necessary – email is not always the best form of communication – think twice before you hit send
- Ask if it is targeted – select the distribution list before you compose to ensure that all recipients are taken account of in the composition
- Revise emails before sending them
- Don’t use any special graphics which only slow things down and make things more difficult – this includes using simple fonts and normal use of lower and upper case.
- Think twice before you send – if the subject matter is highly charged, wait a day before you send it – assume anything you write may end up in court or be read by your boss – avoid “flaming” at all costs.
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