Managing your digital communications: A focus on email and smartphone strategies at work

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Today’s presentation

- The emergence of email as the dominant communication medium in office life
- Project One: My research on email interruptions
- Project Two:
  - My research on strategies for dealing with email and smartphone
  - Addictive behaviours and pathologies
- Practical suggestions for improving email management at work
A quick survey

- Put your hand up if:
  - You use email to communicate at work
  - You are on-line throughout the working day
  - You have set up your phone/mobile device to receive work email
  - Your phone will alert you when you have a new work email
  - Outside of work hours?
  - You receive over 50 work email each day

- If your hand is still up… how do you feel!!???
What are interruptions?

- Events that divert an individual’s attention away from a task or processing sequence (however briefly) in order to engage with another activity.
- No control over their emergence.
- Triggered by something or someone external to the individual’s cognitive world.

  - Van den Berg et.al., 1996; Speier et.al., 2003
The dominant research focus

- Use of experiments
- Interruptions have been enforced
- External parameters
  - Task complexity, mode (e.g. audible) of interruption
- External outcomes
  - Speed of response, errors, completion time
- Interruptions are largely disruptive and should be limited (Jackson et al., 2001)
Email interruptions

- Fundamentally different:
  - Controllable
  - E.g. email’s three stage delivery
    1. Alert
    2. Check (choice)
    3. Process (choice)
Examining controllable behaviour

- **Action theories:**
  - External Parameters
    - e.g. familiarity/complexity of situation
  - Select action program
    - e.g. ignore email interruption
  - Efficiency calculated
    - e.g. satisfaction of task goal at minimum cost

- **Affect-regulation theories:**
  - Internal parameters
    - e.g. current mood
  - Select action program
    - e.g. ignore email interruption
  - Affect ‘calibrated’
    - e.g. mood has improved

- **Personality matters…?**
Three research phases

- Phase One: exploratory study
  - What strategies and why?
    - Well-being
      - Bored = respond to email
      - Too many demands = email annoys them
    - Individual Differences
      - ‘Introverts’ = email has improved their relationships
      - ‘Task focused’ = email wastes time
Three research phases

- Diary study approach
  - Phase Two: internal and external factors and strategy choice
  - Phase Three: multi-goal achievement considered

- Multi-level modelling
Results – Phase Two

- Well-being predicts people’s response
  - When bored people go straight into email after an alert
  - When anxious/angry people spend longer in email system

- People’s response predicts well-being
  - Spend longer in email = feel more active and motivated (if you were bored or tired before)

- Individual differences in strategy chosen and well-being changes
  - Neurotic (worriers) feel more anxious and angry after dealing with email (especially if they were already anxious and angry)
  - Extraverts feel more active and motivated after dealing with email (especially if they have spent longer in the system).
Results – Phase Three

- Different strategic behaviours are associated with different goal reasons and priorities
  - People who delay responding to an email after checking believes this helps the fulfilment of the ‘current’ task goal
  - People who spend a long time dealing with email believe this helps the fulfilment of ‘other’ work goals

- Different personalities prioritise different goals
  - People who have low ‘altruism’ motives choose strategies that help the fulfilment of well-being goals
  - Neurotics (worriers) choose strategies that they believe help them to fulfil ‘current’ task goals

- Wellbeing is affected by one’s belief that different goals have been fulfilled
  - People get more angry and anxious if they choose a strategy that they believe hinders well-being goal fulfilment
  - People feel gloomier if they choose a strategy that they believe hinders ‘other’ work goal fulfilment
Implications

- Research:
  - Extend current action theories – well-being, personality and non-work goals are important in understanding action choice and for calculating efficiency
  - Need to study interruptions in natural environment, using internal parameters

- Practice:
  - Neurotic people (worriers) should turn off their email – especially when feeling in a bad mood
  - Extraverts should keep email on, and should be recruited into jobs that require high levels of email use
  - When bored or tired, spending time in email can improve well-being
Project Two

- Maladaptive strategies for dealing with email
- Two phases
  - Phase One: a taxonomy of strategies for receiving, sending and managing email today.
    - Reasons for use
    - Acknowledging ‘bad habits’ that have negative repercussions
  - Phase Two: A survey to establish:
    - Goal reasons attributed to strategies
    - Relationship with personality
    - Relationship with well-being
Another little survey

- Put your hand up if:
  - You check your email continuously throughout the day, regardless of whether you have received an alert (addictive checking)
  - You get ‘phantom’ alerts
  - You engage in absent-presence

- These are existing and known ‘maladaptive’ or ‘pathological’ email strategies. They have become habitual and indicate evidence of addictive behaviour.
Phase One: The interviews

- 28 participants across a range of organisations, job levels and job types.
- Using desktop and mobile email communications for work.
- 1-2 hour interviews

Sample questions:

- Do you think any of your communication partners have a problem with the strategies you use to send your email? Why?
- Are there any strategies for managing your email that you no longer use? Why?
- Are there any strategies that other people use in receiving email that you:
  - Like
  - Dislike
Key findings

- 88 strategies reported, across 10 themes
- 8 addictive behaviours reported
- 8 reason categories reported
  - Work efficiency
  - Improving well-being
  - Feel in control
  - Be true to one’s ‘self’
  - Concern for others
  - Ease/practicality
  - Habit/automatic
  - Company/industry policy
- Strategies can be positively or negatively construed
Example 1

- Theme: ‘normal strategies for receiving email’
- Strategy: ‘I have audible or visual alerts turned on and I check email on alert’
- Positive Reason: I like to feel on top of things (control goal met)
- Negative Reason: It can be annoying or distracting to others (concern for others goal not met)
Example 2

- Theme: ‘strategies for crafting email’
- Strategy: ‘I write lengthy emails that cover multiple points’
- Positive Reason: I am a verbose person (self truth goal met)
- Negative Reason: They get ignored (work efficiency goal not met)
Example 3

- Theme: ‘preferences for choosing communication medium’
- Strategy: ‘I prefer to use email at work to communicate with people’
- Positive Reason: To avoid confrontation and negative conversations (well-being goal met)
- Negative Reason: Fail to learn communication skills needed to do my job (work efficiency goal not met)
‘Addictive’ behaviours

1. *When I have been using email I can feel disengaged from reality*
2. *I experience 'phantom alerts' (whereby I think I have heard a beep/felt a vibration/seen a message icon, but - on checking for the arrival of an email - I realise that nothing has actually occurred)*
3. *I feel anxious about deleting email messages*
4. *When I don't have access to email (e.g. smartphone broken, email system down, no signal) I feel anxious*
5. *I feel compelled to constantly check my email*
6. *I am comforted by the presence of my device/smartphone, when not at my desk*
Satisfaction of goals

- Most commonly reported positive goal reasons
  - Work efficiency (30%)
  - Well-being (19%)
  - Control (15%)
  - Concern for others (12%)

- Most commonly reported negative goal repercussions
  - Work efficiency (33%)
  - Concern for others (28%)
  - Control (18%)
  - Well-being (16%)
Phase Two Priorities

- Large scale survey of email use (on-line questionnaire) to examine:
  - Personality and stated goal reasons
    - E.g. Do neurotic people choose strategies to ‘improve their work efficiency’?
  - Well-being and strategy choice/addictive behaviours
    - E.g. Do people experiencing negative affect exhibit more ‘pathological’ behaviours (addictions and habits with no goal reasons)?
  - Are certain strategies more/less associated with personality and well-being?
    - E.g. Are extraverts more likely to have alerts on? Do people with positive affect profiles frequently delete their email?
Theoretical Implications

- Redefining ‘efficiency’ and ‘success’ in strategic behaviour – a balance of meeting work goals, well-being goals and other goals.

- Including internal ‘person’ factors (well-being and personality) as being predictors in models of strategic behaviour
  - Predictors of strategy choice
  - Predictors of goal reasons

- Challenging criteria for specifying addictive/pathological email use
Model of strategic behaviour

Parameters influencing strategy choice
- Task
- Situation/environment
- Personality
- Well-being

Select action program
e.g.
ignore email interruption

Goal success measures
- Work efficiency
- Well-being
- Control
- Concern for others

Potential for habits and addictive behaviours to be programmed
Practical Implications

- Reminding people to be mindful that whilst certain strategies may improve their work efficiency they may have negative repercussions for well-being, other people, control, etc.
- Providing recommendations to different personalities, according to which strategies work best for them.
- Providing generic recommendations about strategies that have largely positive effects…
- … and those that have largely negative effects, and which should be avoided
Today’s recommendations…

- Strategies receiving most negative repercussions (avoid these):
  - Ignoring email (not reading or responding to a message)
  - Using automated rules, labels and codes to organise system
  - Email ping-pong or chaining
  - Checks/deals with email in company or meetings
  - OUT OF HOURS deals with email in the usual way
  - Choosing email as the preferred communication mode
  - Checking email on alert given as many negative repercussions as checking email periodically….
Today’s recommendations…

- Strategies receiving least negative repercussions (use these):
  - Checks email quickly but weighs up work priorities before deciding to action
  - OUT OF HOURS will review/check email but not respond, or send ‘holding’ email
  - OUT OF HOURS will not deal with work email
  - Aims to reply to email in given time frame
  - Deletes email when read or actioned
  - Provides a clear and specific subject line
  - Sends targeted email only to relevant recipients
Overall tips...

- Which strategies are you using out of habit – revisit these and reconsider them.

- Consider your reasons for using a strategy. Does it:
  - Improve work performance
  - Improve well-being
  - Allow you to feel in control
  - Show concern to other people

  *If not then consider whether this is a strategy that you should be using*

- Try to be consistent in your strategic approach, so that people know what to expect from you.
Summary

- Email interruptions are not necessarily a bad thing
- Internal factors (wellbeing, personality and goal priorities) influence and are influenced by our strategic behaviour
- ‘Successful’ or ‘efficient’ strategies consider more than just achievement of work goals. Improving well-being, control and showing concern to others are involved
- Managing our email communications effectively depends upon balancing the above
Finally

- Thank you for listening!
- To take part in the email survey (phase two) please contact me:
  e.russell@kingston.ac.uk

- Any questions?