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**FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION VS. E-MAIL:  
WHEN TO USE WHICH FORM OF COMMUNICATION  
IN TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY-FOCUSED SOCIETY**

By  
Wendy Jayne Lathrope

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division  
of Rowan University  
May 12, 2000

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_

Date approved May 12, 2000

## **ABSTRACT**

Wendy J. Lathrope

### **FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION VS. E-MAIL: WHEN TO USE WHICH FORM OF COMMUNICATION IN TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY-FOCUSED SOCIETY**

2000

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin

Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purpose of this study was to determine how employees in the publishing industry prefer to receive information from their managers and whether face-to-face communication is still valued in today's technology-focused society.

Using a mail survey, developed after a Lexis-Nexis literature review at Rowan University, the author polled 163 employees from three Philadelphia-area publishing companies regarding the channels through which they preferred to receive messages from their managers. The author hand-coded the survey results, analyzed the data and developed conclusions and recommendations.

The study found that employees (72.1%) preferred to receive messages through face-to-face communication. Men (8.3%) were more likely to prefer a paper memo than women (4.0%) while women (21.5%) were more likely to prefer e-mail than men (17.2%). More than 25% of 18 to 25 year-old respondents, 21.0% of 26 to 34 year-old

respondents, 21.1% of 35 to 49 year-old respondents and 17% of respondents 50 years and older preferred e-mail communication. The number of years experience did not significantly impact preference for one channel over another.

Overall, men tended to prefer more traditional forms of communication (paper memo, face-to-face) than women. Young employees were more likely to prefer e-mail communication than older employees. Regardless of age, gender and experience, respondents most often chose face-to-face communication as their preferred method of receiving information from managers.

### **Mini-Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine how employees in the publishing industry prefer to receive information from their managers and whether face-to-face communication is still valued in today's technology-focused society.

Regardless of age, gender and experience, respondents most often chose face-to-face communication as their preferred method of receiving information from managers. By initiating a management by walking around strategy, announcing an open door policy and surveying their employees needs, management can address their employees communication needs.

## **Acknowledgments**

To Dr. Bagin – Thank you for your guidance throughout this process. It has been greatly appreciated.

To Gary Bagin, Carol Barringer and Ed Moore – Thank you helping me distribute my survey. I appreciate your kind assistance.

To the staff at Anne Klein & Associates – Your patience, support and encouragement have meant so much. Thank you.

To the congregation at Cross Keys United Methodist Church – Thank you for your prayers, support and encouragement this year and the 27 years before.

To Carol, Dawn, Tara and Wendy who helped me through the tough times – Thank you.

To Grandmom Blong and my aunts, uncles and cousins on both the Lathrope and Blong sides of my family – So many times you have known how to inspire me and keep me going. For this I am eternally grateful.

To my brother, Mark – Thanks for making Arizona (and so many other things) so much fun, in spite of my need to study for the comprehensive exam. I'm glad God chose you for my brother.

To my parents – Your unending love, support and patience throughout this process and my entire life have meant more than you know. Thank you.

And, finally, to my sister, April, who has kept me somewhat sane through this experience and so many others – Go mba seacht bhfearr a bheas tú bliain ó inniu!

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

From the 1980s to the early 1990s, face-to-face communication was all the rage. The Internet and e-mail, however, have replaced face-to-face communication in many instances.

People are divided on whether or not e-mail is as good or better than face-to-face communication. For instance, a study entitled "Straight Talk: Delivering Bad News Through Electronic Communication," conducted by the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, suggests that e-mail may actually be good for managers who are reluctant to share any bad news with employees. E-mail provides an easy-out for managers while giving employees news, albeit bad news, that they may not have heard otherwise. The study also found that staff members would be more truthful in their opinions if they could communicate with management via e-mail rather than face-to-face.<sup>1</sup>

Others disagree. A survey of 150 executives in the United States conducted by

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<sup>1</sup> "E-mail Grants Us the Easy Way Out," PRWeek, July 12, 1999, p. 36.

OfficeTeam found that 44 percent of executives prefer in-person business dealings followed by 34 percent who prefer e-mail, 12 percent paper memos and 7 percent voice mails.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a recent blurb in communication briefings warns professionals against catching e-mailitis, saying it can "damage your human-contact network."<sup>3</sup>

People who prefer to use e-mail have logical arguments. In this era of downsizing, fewer people are available for face-to-face meetings that generally take longer than sending an e-mail.<sup>4</sup> Even those people who may prefer to communicate face-to-face state that it's not always possible. The survey at the American Managers Association's 69<sup>th</sup> annual Human Resources Conference and Expo showed that the same percentage of people who use e-mail most often when communicating (36 percent) actually prefer to communicate face-to-face (23 percent prefer e-mail and 12 percent telephone).<sup>5</sup>

Those who favor face-to-face claim that people who prefer sending bad news via e-mail simply want to avert an unpleasant experience. Another factor, they argue, is that many managers don't have experience in face-to-face communication.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Business Meeting is Alive and Well ... For Now," Risk Management, September 1997, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> "Tips of the Month," communication briefings, August 1999, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> D'Aprix, Roger. "Face-to-face Communication; Why It Doesn't Happen, and Why It Must," Ragan Report, July 19, 1999, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Greenberg, Eric Rolfe. "E-mail Ursurps the Phone as Communication Tool," HRFocus, May 1998, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> D'Aprix, Roger. "Face-to-face Communication; Why It Doesn't Happen, and Why It Must," Ragan Report, July 19, 1999, p. 2.



## **Need**

In a time of increased technological advances, it's important to learn how employees feel about receiving information both via the Internet and face-to-face. The author proposes that there is not one absolute for every type of message sent and that the message will determine which communication channel is preferred. In the surveys noted, no distinctions were offered for when someone might be more likely to use one form of communication over another.

In the summer of 1999, an Oklahoma firm had a massive employee layoff. While this is not uncommon for large companies, the way in which the layoff was handled may come as a surprise to some. Approximately 1,450 employees received their pink slips via e-mail.<sup>7</sup> Was this the way the employees preferred to receive the news of being laid-off? Could the company have done this a better way?

Those questions aren't easily answered. Much of the research conducted in the area of e-mail communication has dealt with personal usage at the workplace or the ways senior and middle management communicate with subordinates. No extensive research has been done to examine how employees want their managers to communicate with them.

## **Limitations**

This study focused only on the channels through which employees prefer to receive certain messages from managers. While studies show that managers most often use

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<sup>7</sup> "It's Easier By E-mail," New York Times, August 8, 1999, section 3, p. 10.

e-mail, yet would rather use face-to-face, research does not offer any insight on which situations managers would more likely use one channel over another. Therefore, it cannot be determined whether managers use face-to-face communication in the situations in which employees prefer it; likewise, with e-mail communication.

This study targeted employees in the publishing industry in the Philadelphia area. It is important to note that the opinions and thoughts of employees in other industries and parts of the country may differ from the opinions of employees polled for this study.

## **Purpose**

Good internal communications is essential to the success of any organization. Therefore, it is important for managers, CEOs and human resource managers to know how their employees prefer to receive messages. This study sets out to find the channels through which employees prefer to receive different kinds of messages. The author believes the results of this study will help managers realize their employees' needs and foster better communications between management and employees.

## **Procedures**

The author conducted an informal literature review of public relations publications for one year before developing this study. Various articles on face-to-face and e-mail communication were located and evaluated. After reviewing approximately ten articles on e-mail and face-to-face communication, the author chose to further examine how people view receiving messages via face-to-face and e-mail communication.

Once a broad topic was selected, the author conducted a more-focused literature review. The author ran various searches on Rowan University's Lexis-Nexis database. The author conducted three keyword searches. "Face-to-face communication" produced 85 articles with only three being useful for the purposes of this study. "E-mail and face-to-face" produced 91 articles with seven relating to the questions addressed in this thesis. "Face-to-face and e-mail and surveys" produced the fewest articles, 20, but three of them were very useful for the purposes of this study. The author also conducted an Internet keyword search using the phrase "face-to-face versus e-mail" which produced no usable results. After examining the information found in the literature review, the author developed the topic for this study.

While the author initially wanted to conduct a national study, she quickly realized that this approach was too broad. Trying to capture a good cross-section of employees from different industries seemed improbable with the tools available to the author. Since no research has been done on this specific topic, the author felt initial research conducted on a smaller scale would prove to be a good starting point for broader, national studies. Therefore, the Philadelphia-area publishing industry was chosen.

A survey was constructed to determine through which channels the target audience preferred to receive different kinds of messages. (See appendix.) The survey listed a series of eleven messages and asked respondents to choose how they wanted to hear the news from their managers: by phone, e-mail, paper memo, face-to-face communication or other specific channel.

The survey was kept to one front page to increase the likelihood of participation.

A postage-paid envelope with the author's address was enclosed to increase return rate.

The author approached three publishing companies in the Philadelphia area to ask them to participate in the study. These companies were not randomly selected, but were deliberately chosen by the author based on her and others' prior dealings with the companies. All three companies (Springhouse Corporation, LRP Publications and Progressive Business Publications) agreed to participate.

The survey was mailed to 214 employees at the three publishing companies selected. Of those mailed, 164 surveys were returned for a return rate of 76 percent.

The author hand-coded the data according to demographic information. From there, the author examined correlations and contrasts, drew conclusions and offered recommendations.

## **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are important to note when reviewing this study.

**E-mail communication** – any message sent electronically through the computer.

Includes messages sent to individuals as well as those posted on employee intranets.

**Face-to-face communication** – when both the sender and the receiver are in the same room together using spoken words to send and receive messages.

**Phone communication** – any message delivered using the telephone. Includes voice mail messages.

**Paper memo** – any message delivered by written word that is printed on a piece of paper.

The paper memo can be sent through interoffice mail, hand-delivered or routed around a department. It cannot be posted on a company's intranet or be in any other computerized form.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to determine how employees in the publishing industry prefer to receive information from their managers and whether face-to-face communication is still valued in today's technology-focused society.

The literature review produced a few significant findings, but much of what was found was on other topics relating to e-mail, such as how employees use it for personal use, how employers can prevent personal use of their corporate e-mail systems and how to apply good manners and etiquette when using e-mail. The few related studies that have been conducted focus on which channels managers, executives and human resource representatives most often use to communicate. No studies were found on how employees prefer to receive information.

The author monitored a variety of public relations publications for one year before conducting this study to determine if a need for it existed. The author first found an article by Jack Pyle, APR, Fellow PRSA. The article suggested that public relations practitioners keep pace with the changes that occur in technology, but not forget the value and importance of face-to-face communication. The article cites "a Technical Assistance

Research Program study found fewer than 15 percent of employees read employee magazines and newsletters" and that one large company found "only four percent of its top managers read a three-page corporate memo."<sup>8</sup>

A Roper Starch Internet survey asked computer owners who they e-mail the most. Eighty-two percent said friends, 59 percent said relatives, 56 percent answered co-workers, 47 percent said clients and 39 percent said their boss.<sup>9</sup>

The August 1999 edition of *communication briefings* also addressed the idea that e-mail was eliminating the need for face-to-face communication. The sidebar warns people about catching e-mailitis and allowing it to destroy personal "human contact networks." The article states that some messages should be delivered in person, even if e-mail will suffice.<sup>10</sup>

In its June 28, 1999 issue, *PR News* printed results of a study conducted by the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences that debunked a rather common belief that "delivering bad news in person is the most professional approach."<sup>11</sup> The results of the study suggest that people are more honest and forthcoming when communicating via e-mail, especially when delivering bad news. The July 12, 1999 edition of *PRWeek* also published the results stating that "apparently, these cold, impersonal times

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<sup>8</sup> Pyle, Jack. "Strategy For The Millennium: Communicating Face-to-Face," The Public Relations Strategist, Fall 1998, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> "The E-mail Express," Tactics, December 1998, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> "Tips of the Month," communication briefings, August 1999, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> "E-mailing a Pink Slip?" PR News, June 6, 1999, p. 4.

demand cold, impersonal ways of deflecting the task of relaying unhappy tidings."<sup>12</sup>

After conducting this very preliminary research, the author had two questions. Perhaps this is all true, but what do employees want? How do they wish to receive their messages from management?

## **Business Implications**

With these questions in mind, the author ran various searches on Rowan University's Lexis-Nexis database. The author conducted three keyword searches. "Face-to-face communication" produced 85 articles, "e-mail and face-to-face" produced 91 articles and "face-to-face and e-mail and surveys" produced the fewest articles, 20. Thirteen of these articles were useful for the purposes of this study. The author also conducted an Internet keyword search using the phrase "face-to-face versus e-mail," which produced no usable results.

Many of the studies were repeated during the searches and much of what was found was on other topics relating to e-mail, such as how employees use it for personal use, how employers can prevent personal use of their e-mail systems by employees and how to apply good manners and etiquette when using e-mail.

During the Lexis-Nexis searches, the author also found studies regarding how people in Canada, Australia and Japan view e-mail and face-to-face communication. While the author chose not to include these results in this study, the author feels it is

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<sup>12</sup> "E-mail Grants Us the Easy Way Out," PRWeek, July 12, 1999, p. 36.



important to note that America is not the only country struggling with this new issue surrounding communication.

During the search using "face-to-face and e-mail and surveys," the author found results of a survey conducted by the American Management Association during its 69<sup>th</sup> annual Human Resources Conference and Expo in New York in April 1998. The results showed that e-mail was indeed the most frequently used method of communicating by attendees, ousting the telephone as the previous primary means of business communication. The survey, in which 407 attendees participated, found that 36 percent used e-mail most often when communicating, 26 percent used the telephone and 15 percent used face-to-face. No distinctions were offered for when someone might be more likely to use one form of communication over another. The survey also found that while 36 percent of respondents actually preferred to communicate face-to-face (23 percent preferred e-mail and 12 percent telephone), in today's high-paced business world, in-person meetings are not always possible.<sup>13</sup>

Another survey, also found during the "face-to-face and e-mail and survey" database search, showed that the business meeting was "alive and well ... for now." OfficeTeam conducted a survey of 150 executives in the United States that found that 44 percent of executives prefer in-person business dealings, 34 percent prefer e-mail, 12 percent paper memos and 7 percent voice mails.<sup>14</sup> Again, no distinctions were used for

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<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, Eric Rolfe. "E-mail Ursurps the Phone as Communication Tool," HRFocus, May 1998, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> "The Business Meeting is Alive and Well ... For Now," Risk Management, September 1997, p. 6.

when one might tend to use one form of communication over another.

Another survey, found using the keyword search "face-to-face communication," was conducted by the Council of Communication Management (CCM) and Simmons College Graduate Program in Communications Management. The study polled 225 members of the CCM, whose members include senior communications professionals from major United States and Canadian corporations. Results of the 1995 study showed that, while face-to-face communication between colleagues and managers was still effective and important, both managers and employees felt that speed was the most important aspect of effective communication, thus making face-to-face communication more difficult. Some of the reasons respondents cited for using face-to-face communication less often included but were not necessarily limited to employee requests for timely information, the need to rebuild trust among employees, to assist employees in understanding strategy and to address ongoing changes in the company.<sup>15</sup>

While using the keywords "face-to-face communication," the author found reference to a survey of top executives at 42 Fortune 500 companies. No specific percentages were listed; however, the article stated that while today's technological advances play a bigger part in communication, traditional communication methods, such as face-to-face, are still vital.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "The Communication Paradox: Face-to-Face Communication in the Age of Speed," Business Wire, October 10, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Rupp, Denise. "Communication: Tech Versus Touch," HRFocus, November 1996, pp. 16 - 17.

## Psychological Implications

Because this thesis focuses on different types of communication, the author feels the psychological application of communication must also be addressed.

During the database search, the author found many articles that discussed how the way people communicate can affect them psychologically. In an article entitled "The Death of Civility," Psychiatrist Edward Hallowell states that many of his patients described "feelings of anxiety, isolation and confusion after encounters with co-employees who relied on e-mail and voice mail." Hallowell suggests that, to alleviate these feelings, people use face-to-face communication, even if it requires more time than e-mail or voice mail.<sup>17</sup>

Another article "Finding the Right Medium for The Message," says that face-to-face communication is self-correcting because people can use cues, such as body language and facial expressions. E-mail is not self-correcting and, therefore, can sometimes be misinterpreted.<sup>18</sup> Yet, an article in *Industry Week* entitled "Losing the Personal Touch" states that an increasing number of executives would rather communicate via e-mail than speak face-to-face with their employees, according to editors of *Managers Edge*. The article goes on to say that "The problem with forgoing conversation is that verbal and visual cues are nonexistent in e-mail. Consequently, you can't 'hear' hesitancy or

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<sup>17</sup> Lee, Chris. "The Death of Civility," Training, July 1999, pp. 24 - 30.

<sup>18</sup> Maciag, Gregory A. "Finding the Right Medium for the Message," National Underwriter Life & Health, October 20, 1997, pp. 19 - 20.

confidence in a message."<sup>19</sup>

Mary Mitchell, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Etiquette* and president of Uncommon Courtesies (a Philadelphia-based business-etiquette consulting firm), suggests that e-mail is enabling people to be ruder than before. "The reason is twofold. First, the average executive is bombarded with so much information that in trying to keep up he or she forgets to be courteous. Second, the advent of electronic communication has caused a decline in face-to-face contact."<sup>20</sup>

The author also found some research that supports using e-mail over face-to-face communication. A study conducted by Stephanie Watts Sussman of Case Western Reserve University and Lee Sprouli of New York University found "there is less distortion of facts in relaying negative news via e-mail than by phone or in person." This finding would suggest that, to communicate most effectively in negative situations, which is one of every public relations practitioner's goals, people should use e-mail. The study also suggests, however, that some bad news, such as layoffs, should be communicated by using face-to-face. "Offering negative comments face-to-face is often taken as a sign that the news is important and the deliverer cares about the recipient," says Sussman.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Challenger, Gray and Christmas, an employment consulting firm, states that an increased number of companies are indeed using e-mail to lay off workers. In fact, an

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<sup>19</sup> "Losing the Personal Touch," Industry Week, February 2, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Caudron, Shari. "Virtual Manners," Industry Week, July 6, 1998, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> "It's Easier By E-mail," New York Times, August 8, 1999, sec. 3, p. 10.

Oklahoma firm laid-off 1,450 employees in June 1999 by sending a mass e-mail.<sup>22</sup>

Studies at Northwestern University's School of Speech also support the theory that e-mail enables people to be more honest with one another. "Because e-mail operates without cues such as shrugs, smiles and body language, computers may be useful in forcing people to say what they mean," the studies found. In one experiment, Northwestern assigned the same task to groups of three people who were required to meet face-to-face and other groups of three people who were required to meet on-line and never in-person. After six weeks, the groups who never met were found to be forming better relationships than those in the face-to-face groups.<sup>23</sup> This experiment can make the argument that, if businesses want their employees to form positive relationships with one another, they should conduct most of their communication via e-mail.

## **Contradictions**

Because much of the information found during the literature review contradicted itself, the author was more determined to find an answer to the questions put forth in this study. What do employees want? How do they wish to receive their messages from management?

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<sup>22</sup> "Another Cliche Gets the Pink Slip," The Seattle Times, July 12, 1999, p. C1.

<sup>23</sup> Goldstein, Alan. "E-mail Communicates Better Than Talk," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 15, 1995, p. 8C.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to find the channels through which employees prefer to receive different kinds of messages.

This study began with a literary review of a variety of publications, including national newspapers, public relations publications, marketing and management publications and other print sources. After examining previous research and studies and discussing the subject with various public relations practitioners, the author determined this study was valid and would benefit public relations practitioners, as well as the entire business community.

Next, the author conducted a formal literature review at Rowan University using the Lexis-Nexis database. The author conducted three keyword searches. "Face-to-face communication" produced 85 articles with only three being useful for the purposes of this study. "E-mail and face-to-face" produced 91 articles with seven relating to the questions addressed in this thesis. "Face-to-face and e-mail and surveys" produced the fewest articles, 20, but three of them were very useful for the purposes of this study. The author also conducted an Internet keyword search, using the phrase "face-to-face versus e-mail."

It produced no usable results.

The author then developed a survey to determine the channels through which employees prefer to receive specific messages. After reviewing the survey with thesis advisor Dr. Don Bagin and public relations colleagues, the author revised the survey as needed.

The author approached three publishing companies in the Philadelphia area to ask them to participate in the survey. These companies were not randomly selected, but were deliberately chosen by the author based on her experience and the experience of others with the companies. All three companies (Springhouse Corporation, LRP Publications and Progressive Business Publications) agreed to participate. The survey was mailed to each employee who was on the employee list that each company provided for a total of 214 surveys mailed. Of the employees who received the survey, 164 responded for a return rate of 76%.

The author hand-coded the survey results and analyzed the data. After examining the findings and identifying correlations, the author developed conclusions and recommendations.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Data**

The purpose of this study was to determine how employees in the publishing industry prefer to receive information from their managers and whether face-to-face communication is still valued in today's technology-focused society.

Specifically, the study set out to answer the following questions:

- Is face-to-face communication still valued?
- Has the introduction of e-mail changed the way we communicate internally?
- Do employees prefer one channel of communication for certain messages and another channel for others?
- Does age or work experience have anything to do with how people prefer to receive information from their managers?

Of the 214 surveys mailed, 164 were completed and returned. The following results, however, are based on a response rate of 163 as one survey was returned without having the demographic questions answered and therefore could not be properly coded.



In this section, the author shares the results of the survey. She offers the answers to each question as well as an analysis of the findings. Results are also provided by gender, age and number of years experience in the publishing industry.

## Survey Responses

Respondents were asked how they would prefer to receive the following information.

Q1. You've been promoted.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	2	1.2%
Phone	1	0.6%
Face-to-face meeting	159	97.6%
Paper memo	0	-
Other	1*	0.6%
Total	163	100%

\* = lunch

Q2. Your company has merged with another company.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	33	20.3%
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	121	74.2%
Paper memo	8	4.9%
Other	1*	0.6%
Total	163	100%

\* = paper memo or e-mail and face-to-face

Q3. Your health benefits will cost \$5 more per month.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	106	65.0%
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	13	8.0%
Paper memo	42	25.8%
Other	2*	1.2%
Total	163	100%

\* = e-mail and face-to-face (1); e-mail and paper memo (1)

Q4. You've been named Employee of the Month.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	14	8.6%
Phone	4	2.5%
Face-to-face meeting	139	85.3%
Paper memo	3	1.8%
Other	3*	1.8%
Total	163	100%

\* = e-mail, phone and face-to-face (1); surprise (1); not specified (1)

Q5. A new employee has joined your department.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	71	43.6%
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	85	52.1%
Paper memo	6	3.7%
Other	1*	0.6%
Total	163	100%

\* = not specified

Q6. Your boss compliments your work.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	33	20.2%
Phone	1	0.6%
Face-to-face meeting	116	71.2%
Paper memo	4	2.5%
Other	9*	5.5%
Total	163	100%

\* = all channels (2); any channel (3); e-mail and face-to-face (3);

e-mail and paper memo (1)

Q7. Your manager has resigned.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	11	6.7%
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	146	89.6%
Paper memo	2	1.2%
Other	4*	2.5%
Total	163	100%

\* = e-mail and face-to-face (2); not specified (2)

Q8. You've been laid off.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	0	-
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	162	99.4%
Paper memo	0	-
Other	1*	0.6%
Total	163	100%

\* = not specified

Q9. Employees (other than yourself) have been laid off.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	61	37.4%
Phone	2	1.2%
Face-to-face meeting	79	48.5%
Paper memo	17	10.4%
Other	4*	2.5%
Total	163	100%

\* = not at all (1); depends (1); not specified (2)

Q10. A crisis has occurred at your company.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	31	19.0%
Phone	3	1.8%
Face-to-face meeting	118	72.4%
Paper memo	4	2.5%
Other	7*	4.3%
Total	163	100%

\* = depends (5); e-mail and face-to-face (2)

Q11. You've been reprimanded.

	Frequency	Percentage
E-mail	6	3.7%
Phone	0	-
Face-to-face meeting	154	94.5%
Paper memo	3	1.8%
Other	0	-
Total	163	100%

Q12. Gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Men	36	22.1%
Women	127	77.9%
Total	163	100%

Q13. Age

	Frequency	Percentage
18 - 25	18	11.0%
26 - 34	35	21.5%
35 - 49	71	43.6%
50 and over	39	23.9%
Total	163	100%

Q14. Number of years experience in the publishing industry

	Frequency	Percentage
5 or less	67	41.1%
6 - 10	28	17.2%
11 - 20	51	31.3%
21 or more	17	10.4%
Total	163	100%

## Findings

- Overall, employees (72.1%) prefer face-to-face communication, followed by e-mail (20.5%) and paper memo (5%).
- Phone was the least preferred channel by employees (0.6%).
- Face-to-face communication was preferred overall in every scenario except for “your health benefits will cost \$5 more per month.” In that scenario, e-mail (65.0%) was named as the most preferred channel followed by paper memo (25.8%) and face-to-face (8.0%).
- Paper memo failed to come close to the most preferred channel for any scenario, gaining the most responses for “your health benefits will cost \$5 more per month” (25.8%), “employees (other than yourself) have been laid off” (10.4%) and “your company has merged with another company” (4.9%).
- Telephone failed to receive more than 2.5% for any scenario.
- Face-to-face was the preferred channel for being promoted (97.6%), being laid off (99.4%) and being reprimanded (94.5%).
- No respondents preferred to be laid off via e-mail, paper memo or phone. Only one respondent, who chose the “other” category, did not chose to receive this information via face-to-face.
- When receiving bad news, employees chose to hear it via face-to-face communication. This included being laid off (99.4%), being reprimanded (94.5%), a manager resigning (89.6%), a merger with another company (74.2%), crisis occurring at the company (72.4%) and coworkers being laid off (48.5%).



- Both men (72.7%) and women (71.9%) most often preferred to receive messages through face-to-face communication.
- Women (21.5%) were more likely to prefer e-mail communication than men (17.2%).
- Men (8.3%) were more likely to prefer a paper memo than women (4.0%).
- Phone was the least preferred channel by both men (1.0%) and women (0.5%).
- More men (83.3%) than women (69.3%) preferred to hear that a crisis has occurred at their company via face-to-face.
- As the age of the respondents increased, so did the desire to receive messages through face-to-face communication. More than 67% of 18 to 25 year-old respondents, 71.7% of 26 to 34 year-old respondents, 72.2% of 35 to 49 year old respondents and 73.7% of respondents over 50 years old preferred face-to-face communication.
- As the age of the respondents increases, the preference for e-mail communication decreased. More than 25% of 18 to 25 year-old respondents, 21.0% of 26 to 34 year-old respondents, 21.1% of 35 to 49 year-old respondents, 17% of respondents 50 years old and over preferred e-mail communication.
- Employees aged 18 to 25 were least likely to prefer a paper memo (3.5%). Conversely, those employees over 50 years of age were most likely to prefer communication via paper memo (6.4%).
- No respondents aged 18 to 25 preferred the telephone for receiving messages.

- More than 11% of 18 to 25 year-old respondents chose e-mail as the preferred channel for being reprimanded whereas only 8.2% of all other age groups combined preferred e-mail in this scenario.
- The older the respondents, the more likely they were to choose face-to-face communication when learning about coworker layoffs. More than 55% of respondents over 50 years old, 50.7% of respondents aged 35 to 49, 48.6% of respondents aged 26 to 34 and 27.8% of respondents aged 18 to 25 preferred to receive information about coworker layoffs through face-to-face communication.
- The number of years experience in the publishing industry did not have any impact on preference. Responses were very similar across experience levels.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to find the channels through which employees prefer to receive different kinds of messages.

The author conducted a literature review using the Lexis-Nexis database at Rowan University. The author conducted three keyword searches. "Face-to-face communication" produced 85 articles; "e-mail and face-to-face" produced 91 articles; and "face-to-face and e-mail and surveys" produced 20 articles. Through this search, the author found thirteen articles relevant to this study.

The author then developed a survey designed to determine the channels through which employees prefer to receive specific messages. The survey was mailed to 214 employees at three different Philadelphia-area publishing companies (Springhouse Corporation, LRP Publications and Progressive Business Publications). Of the surveys 164 surveys returned, one was excluded for lack of demographic information. Therefore, the survey results are based on a return rate of 76.1%.

The author hand-coded the survey results and analyzed the data. After examining the findings and identifying correlations, the author developed conclusions and recommendations.

## **Conclusions**

As evidenced by this study, face-to-face communication is still valued in the publishing industry. Respondents (72.1%) overwhelmingly chose face-to-face communication as their preferred means of receiving messages. E-mail (20.5%) and paper memo (5%) lagged behind. The author found this intriguing. While most employees prefer to receive information through face-to-face communication, most human resource managers say they use e-mail as their primary method of communication.

Earlier research conducted by Stephanie Watts Sussman of Case Western Reserve University and Lee Sprouli of New York University found that e-mail communication is less likely to distort facts when relaying negative information.<sup>24</sup> However, the author learned through this survey that employees preferred to receive "bad" news face-to-face rather than via e-mail. These potentially negative scenarios included being laid off (99.4%), being reprimanded (94.5%), a manager resigning (89.6%), a merger with another company (74.2%), a crisis occurring at the company (72.4%) and coworkers being laid off (48.5%).

These two findings alone could partly explain why some people feel internal

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<sup>24</sup> "It's Easier By E-mail," New York Times, August 8, 1999, sec. 3, p. 10.

communications is not as productive as it could be.

The author also found it interesting that men (8.3%) were more likely than women (4.0%) to prefer to receive communication through paper memo. Perhaps this is because paper memos have traditionally been used in business much as men have traditionally always held the leadership roles in business. Women, on the other hand, have just started to advance in the business world over the past 35 to 40 years. The survey found that more women (21.5%) preferred e-mail than men (17.2%). The author wonders if the fact that men traditionally dominated the business world has anything to do with their preference of receiving a paper memo.

Not surprisingly, the author found that younger employees were more likely to prefer receiving messages via e-mail than older employees. More than 11% of 18 to 25 year-old respondents chose e-mail as the preferred channel for being reprimanded whereas only 8.2% of all other age groups combined preferred e-mail in this scenario. The author theorizes that this is because the younger employees most likely have had more experience with new technology and are not used to receiving messages through many other channels.

No respondents stated that they would like to be laid off via e-mail. In fact, all but one respondent preferred to receive this information face-to-face. This finding is in sharp contrast to the company in Oklahoma that laid off 1,450 via e-mailed pink slips.<sup>25</sup>

When asked how they would prefer to learn about a crisis at the company, five respondents stated that it would depend on the situation. One person asked "Am I in danger?" Another stated "It depends of the type of crisis." These comments suggest that

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<sup>25</sup> "Another Cliche Gets the Pink Slip," The Seattle Times, July 12, 1999, p. C1.

the way employees prefer to receive information about a company crisis depends on the crisis itself. The author believes that top executives would benefit from further study on this topic.

Older employees were more likely to prefer hearing about coworker layoffs via face-to-face communication than younger employees. More than 55% of respondents over 50 years old, 50.7% of respondents aged 35 to 49, 48.6% of respondents aged 26 to 34 and 27.8% of respondents aged 18 to 25 preferred to receive information about coworker layoffs through face-to-face communication. The author wonders if this is because older people have tended to work for a smaller amount of companies than younger people. Many Baby Boomers have worked for just one or two companies their entire careers.

Finally, because this study focused on only employees in the publishing industry in the Philadelphia area, it cannot conclude that all employees prefer to receive information in the same way as the employees in this sample do.

## **Recommendations for Management**

The author recommends the following to human resource managers, department managers and executives:

- Initiating a management by walking around policy. Managers should be visible to their employees, available for discussion and open to employees' ideas.
- Instituting an open door policy, allowing employees to comfortably approach managers when they have a problem, question or suggestion.

- Anonymously surveying employees within the company to learn which forms of company communication (Intranet, newsletter) are working.

## **Recommendations for Further Study**

For further study, the author suggests:

- holding focus groups to determine if the channels through which managers communicate have anything to do with how employees view their company's internal communications. A survey may also be warranted depending on the focus group data.
- conducting a study of the history of business, including the traditional roles of men and women in the business world. This preliminary data could be followed by a series of in-depth interviews with men and women to determine the rationale as to why different genders prefer different channels of communication.
- conducting a study that examines the reasons why younger employees tend to prefer e-mail and older employees do not. The author also suggests studying economically feasible and time-efficient ways of communicating that would satisfy both age groups.
- researching companies throughout the United States to see if, indeed, other companies are using e-mail to lay off employees. If so, what is the reasoning behind using this channel? How do employees feel about being laid off via e-mail? If e-mail is not being used for laying off employees, which channel of communication is?

- conducting a survey, possibly followed by in-depth interviews and focus groups, to determine which channels management should use to alert employees to a number of different crises.
- researching current job market conditions to determine if employment trends have anything to do with how people prefer to receive messages regarding their coworkers. The results of this study show that older employees prefer to hear about coworker layoffs via face-to-face communication whereas younger employees prefer e-mail. Could it be that younger employees don't stay with a company long enough to care about other employees? The author feels this area deserves further examination.
- surveying a greater number of employees across a wide variety of industries.



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## Internal Communications Survey

My name is Wendy Lathrope. I am a public relations graduate student at Rowan University and am conducting this survey as part of a thesis on internal communications. Please help me with my research by participating in this survey.

This survey is designed to determine how employees in the publishing industry prefer to receive information from their employers. Your answers will be combined with those of your coworkers as well as employees from two other area publishing companies. Your answers will be reported in group form only so no one will know your individual answers.

**How would you prefer to receive the following information?** (Check one answer only please.)

	E-mail	Phone	Face-to-face meeting	Paper memo	Other (please specify)
You've been promoted.					
Your company has merged with another company.					
Your health benefits will cost \$5 more per month.					
You've been named employee of the month.					
A new employee has joined your department.					
Your boss compliments your work.					
Your manager has resigned.					
You've been laid off.					
Employees (other than yourself) have been laid off.					
A crisis has occurred at your company.					
You've been reprimanded.					

**Please circle one answer only.**

- 1.) Your gender:  
Male                      Female
- 2.) Your age:  
18 - 25                      26 - 34                      35 - 49                      50 and over
- 3.) Number of years experience you have in the publishing industry:  
5 or less                      6 - 10                      11 - 20                      21 or more

Please mail your completed survey in the enclosed, postpaid envelope provided. If you no longer have that envelope, please mail the survey to: Wendy Lathrope, 1752 North Tuckahoe Road, Williamstown, NJ 08094.

***Thank you so much for your participation!***