

## **International Perceptions Regarding Appropriate Use of Company Email**

**Nancy Keith**  
**Missouri State University**

**Heidi Perreault**  
**Missouri State University**

*International and U.S. students provided input on what they perceived to be appropriate actions relating to the use of a company email system. Actions deemed to be acceptable included using the system to send and receive personal messages and allowing family members to use the company email system. In general, international students rated actions as being more acceptable than did U.S. students. Students with work experience were somewhat less tolerant of the actions. Training on what constitutes appropriate use of company email systems is suggested for both experienced workers and new hires.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Email is the most used business computer application (Taylor, 2002), and it has become the preferred communication channel for many business functions (Monitoring employees' use, n.d.). To protect themselves from the risks associated with inappropriate email use by employees, organizations need to define email use expectations. Taylor (2002) stressed the importance of designing a corporate policy that fits the organizational culture. For international organizations, the effort to establish a universal policy that fits all company locations is difficult. Cultural perceptions and business practices differ between countries (Bynum, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to examine from an international perspective the differences in perceptions regarding appropriate use of company email systems. It examined the similarities and differences in what is considered appropriate and not appropriate behavior by U.S. and international students. Additional comparisons were made to determine if perceptions differed between students with work experience and those with little to no work experience. The findings will assist managers in setting and communicating a company email policy that recognizes the diverse views held by an international workforce. It also will provide information regarding the differences in technology-use training and supervision that may be needed for new hires based on their degree of prior work experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Taylor (2002) criticized organizations for not giving email abuse more attention. A detailed email-use policy should be developed and shared. It should contain appropriate and inappropriate use examples, personal responsibility expectations, and archiving rules. Periodic audits can determine if the policy is being followed and identify individuals abusing the policy. Dangers from inappropriate email use include loss of ability to compete, compromised computer system, and legal liability (Employee misuse of company email, 2005).

Regulating appropriate use within the workplace is an issue partly because employees have blatantly ignored email policy. Although they realized their actions were not appropriate based on company policy, many employees rationalized that their actions were inconsequential to the organization (Computer users, 2004). British professional staff members, for example, acknowledged that using company email for non-business purposes was wrong and indicated they understood the company could be liable for their actions in a study conducted by the global market research company, NOP. Yet, 69% of the respondents indicated they would open an email even if they suspected it contain inappropriate workplace content such as pornographic, racist, or sexist material (IT's shame at top, 2002).

United States employees also have admitted to using company email for personal email messages (American society of chartered life, 1998). Reasons for using a company system instead of a home computer for personal messaging included both convenience and the access to additional technology features available at the workplace such as a CD burner, high speed printer, and hard drive space (AssetMetrix, 2003). When using the company system to access personal email attachments, the employee places the organization at risk. If an employee were to view or share pornography, for example, the company is exposed to a potential sexual harassment charge (Monitoring employees' use, n.d.). Organizations are beginning to take a stronger stand on enforcing email policy. A Canadian aerospace company, which had had email abuse problems in the past, took swift action against employees who breached the current, stricter company email policy. Over one hundred workers were either fired or disciplined (Saint-Cyr, 2004). Eighty employees of an English insurance company were suspended for sharing a potentially offensive email.

In addition to exposing the company to unnecessary risk, using company resources for other than business reasons adversely impacts productivity. British workers admitted to wasting at least 40 minutes a day on non-business related email. The emails included gossiping with coworkers, visiting with non-work friends, organizing social activities, and forwarding jokes (Aponovich, 2001). A type of email misuse becoming more common in India is sending messages under another's name. The purposes given for the action were to create problems for colleagues and to spread gossip. Managers attribute the actions to rivalry caused by the competitive nature of the work environment (Rathi, 2002.).

Industry analysts warn that there will be an increase in workplace problems associated with email abuse. Part of the problem is the fast growth of email as the communication medium of choice. Estimated growth of email accounts worldwide was from 505 million accounts in 2001 to 36 billion accounts in 2005. Along with the increased use of email have come problems such as spam and viruses (Palmer, 2003). Organizations have not adjusted their training nor their technology policies to deal with the explosion of email use. A British survey found that 45% of workers used email regularly with little or no restrictions. And 5% admitted to responding to spam while at work (Employee misuse of company email, 2005). Spam is often used to spread

viruses and to gain control of computers. Responding to spam puts a company's computer system and corporate data at risk. Training on the dangers of email misuse and a strict enforcement of policy is recommended (Palmer, 2003).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study surveyed both U.S. and international students attending a university in the Midwestern region of the United States. The students were surveyed to determine their perceptions regarding the acceptability of several actions relating to using a company email system. Participants in the study included students from all academic colleges. The university's student services administrative office provided the students' names and local addresses. The students were sent a letter explaining that the survey was part of a research project and that individual student identities would not be released. No incentives for completing the survey were offered. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included for ease in returning completed surveys.

The researchers created realistic workplace scenarios associated with using a company email system for unauthorized purposes. The actions portrayed in the scenarios were based on a review of the literature relating to workplace technology and email use. A panel of experts reviewed the instrument and provided input on the scenario content and presentation. The instrument was field tested with students who were not involved in the study. Some minor wording changes were made based on student suggestions.

The directions accompanying the survey explained that the respondents were to assume that they were working within an organization located in their home country and that they had knowledge of their co-workers performing the actions depicted in the scenarios. On a seven-point likert scale format (1 = very acceptable; 4 = uncertain; and 7 = very unacceptable), students rated the acceptability of the co-workers' actions. Mean scores were computed to determine overall acceptability perceptions. Analysis of variance was used to compare mean responses by geographical area. Work experience also was compared using analysis of variance to determine if the variable had an influence on acceptability ratings.

## **FINDINGS**

Usable surveys were obtained from 191 U.S. students and 123 students with nationalities from countries other than the U.S. A majority of the international students (54%) were from Asia. The remaining students were from Europe, Africa, South and Central America, and the Middle East. The majority (70%) of the students indicated they were under 30 years of age and had experience (57%) working within a business organization. Both genders were represented (53% male and 47% female).

The scenarios presented to the students described actions relating to company email use. Each action is listed in Table 1 with its corresponding overall acceptability rating mean. The order of presentation is most acceptable to least acceptable action rating. The students considered it acceptable to use the company email system to send personal messages and to allow family members to use the system to send and receive messages. The students indicated they were unsure of the acceptability of forwarding messages without the permission of the author. Reading another coworker's email messages and using the email system to send coworkers ethnic, racial, or sexual material were the two email actions rated as most unacceptable.

**TABLE 1**  
**OVERALL ACCEPTABILITY MEANS FOR EMAIL ACTIONS**  
**LISTED FROM MOST TO LEAST ACCEPTABLE**

Email Action:	Mean (n=314)
Use company email system to	
Send messages to friends and family	3.01
Allow family to send & receive message	3.90
Forward messages without permission of author	4.41
Send messages anonymously or under a false identity	5.64
Send messages as if on behalf of the company when they are not	5.84
Send coworkers ethnic, racial, or sexual material	6.03
Read coworkers' email messages	6.46

Scale: 1 = Very acceptable, 4 = Uncertain, 7 = Very Unacceptable

When compared by geographic region, the international students rated four of the seven actions as being more acceptable than did the U.S. students. The actions included the following: using the company email system to send messages to family and friends; allow family to send and receive messages; send messages as if on behalf of the company when they are not; and send coworkers ethnic, racial, or sexual material.

Significant differences were noted for two of the actions and are shown in Table 2. For one of those actions the U.S. students indicated the action was more acceptable than did the international students. The action was "read coworkers' email messages." For the other action, the international students rated that action as more acceptable. The action was "send messages as if on behalf of the company when they are not."

**TABLE 2**  
**EMAIL ACTION ACCEPTABILITY RATINGS COMPARED BY GEOGRAPHIC**  
**REGION**

Email Action:	Mean		P value
	U.S. Students (n=191)	International Students (n=123)	
Use company email system to			
Send messages to friends and family	3.07	2.90	NS
Allow family to send & receive message	3.97	3.78	NS
Forward messages without permission of author	4.30	4.59	NS
Send messages anonymously or under a false identity	5.53	5.80	NS
Send messages as if on behalf of the company when they are not	5.93	5.69	.0982
Send coworkers ethnic, racial, or sexual material	6.04	6.00	NS
Read coworkers' email messages	6.30	6.69	.0006

Scale: 1 = Very acceptable, 4 = Uncertain, 7 = Very Unacceptable

NS=not significant

To determine if work experience had an effect on the respondents' acceptability perceptions, acceptability ratings of the groups with and without work experience were compared. The mean acceptability ratings are presented in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EMAIL ACCEPTABILITY MEANS**  
**COMPARED BY WORK**

Email Action: Use company email system to	Mean				p value
	No Work Experience		Work Experience		
	U.S. (n=67)	Inter (n=66)	U.S. (n=122)	Inter (n=57)	
Send messages to friends and family	3.0	2.9	3.1	2.9	NS
Allow family to send & receive message	3.8	3.6	4.1	4.0	NS
Forward messages without permission of author	4.5ab	4.3b	4.2b	4.9a	.0355
Send messages anonymously or under a false identity	5.0	5.7	5.8	6.0	NS
Send messages as if on behalf of the company when they are not	5.7	5.5	6.0	5.9	NS
Send coworkers ethnic, racial, or sexual material	6.0	6.0	6.1	6.0	NS
Read coworkers' email messages	6.3	6.7	6.3	6.7	NS

Scale: 1 = Very acceptable, 4 = Uncertain, 7 = Very Unacceptable

NS=not significant

a,b=row means with unlike letters are significantly different

Work experience was identified as a significant factor in the acceptability ratings for one action, forward email messages without the permission of the author. The international students with work experience rated the action as being significantly less acceptable than did international students without work experience and the U.S. students with work experience. For all of the other actions, those students with work experience rated each action as being as acceptable as or less acceptable than did the students without work experience.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

One of the email behaviors receiving acceptable mean ratings by both the U.S. and international students was using the company email systems to send email messages to friends and family. The findings concur with a study by the American Society of Charter Life (1998) which found that the majority of workers felt using company email for personal messages was acceptable. Nesbitt (2001) reported that business workers spend two to three hours a day using email. This time should be spent on company business not on personal email messages.

The students realized that sending messages with possibly offensive jokes or comments with ethnic, racial, or sexual content was inappropriate. Such messages are the most common type

cited as a justification for firing or suspending employees (IT's a shame at top, 2002). It is not just the sharing of such messages, jokes, or images that is inappropriate. Harassment complaints can include stored images. The company can be held liable if an employee downloads and stores offensive images on the company system whether or not the images are shared with others (Websense, 2004). Ten percent of U.S. business organizations have had email subpoenaed in relation to sexual harassment charges (Palmer, 2003).

Both the U.S. and international students with work experience were more aware than the students without work experience of the inappropriateness of the email actions portrayed in the scenarios. The students with work experience, however, did rate sending messages to friends and family as being acceptable. They were unsure about the acceptability of allowing family members to use the company's email system to forward messages without the author's permission. This indicates business organizations should not assume that experienced workers are using technology appropriately. All employees, experienced workers and new hires, need reminders on workplace exceptions.

International students in general were more tolerant of the emails behaviors depicted within the scenarios and rated them as more acceptable than did the U.S. students. This finding is consistent with the literature. Nyaw and Ng (1994) stressed that what is deemed to be appropriate behavior will differ based on country of origin. Bynum (1998) concurred noting that business-related behaviors are not universal but are influenced by international cultural norms. Setting an email policy, therefore, may not guarantee that workers use the email system appropriately. Cultural norms and perceptions influence workers' decisions more than stated policies (Whipple & Swords, 1992).

Having an email policy is the first step. In addition to a stated policy, organizations need to provide training and reinforce the training with periodic reminders promoting appropriate use. Gaudin (2002) suggested that the email use policy be brought to the attention of employees frequently to remind employees of company expectations. Risks associated with misusing company resources also should be shared. About 80% of U.S. organizations do monitor some employee technology use including the telephone, email, and Internet access. Employees should be made aware of the monitoring and the consequences of misusing company resources (Wilde, 2002).

## REFERENCES

American Society of Chartered Life Underwriters & Chartered Financial Consultants and Ethics Officer Association. (1998). *Technology & ethics in the workplace*. Bryn Mawr, PA: Author.

Aponovich, D. (2001, August 21). *The roundup: handling e-mail misuse*. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from [www.cioupdate.com/research/article.php/870491](http://www.cioupdate.com/research/article.php/870491).

AssetMetrix Research Labs. (2003). *Corporate P2P usage and risk analysis*. Ottawa, Ontario: Author.

Bynum, T. (1998). *Ethics in the information age*. Retrieved February 8, 2005, from [www.southernct.edu/organizations/rccs/resources/research/global\\_info/bynum\\_info\\_age.html](http://www.southernct.edu/organizations/rccs/resources/research/global_info/bynum_info_age.html).

Computer users are “IT security incidents waiting to happen”. (2004, January 9). Retrieved March 10, 2005, from [www.trainingreference.co.uk/news/its040109.htm](http://www.trainingreference.co.uk/news/its040109.htm).

Employee misuse of company email a clear and present danger. (2005, March 24). Retrieved April 14, 2005, from [www.workplacelaw.net/display\\_printable.php?resource\\_id=5576](http://www.workplacelaw.net/display_printable.php?resource_id=5576).

Gaudin, S. (2002, April 26). Employee abuse of Internet rampant. CIO Update. Retrieved March 8, 2005, from [www.cioupdate.com/news/article.php/10493\\_1016261](http://www.cioupdate.com/news/article.php/10493_1016261).

IT’s shame at top of mucky e-mail league. (2002, August 29). Computer Weekly, 32.

Monitoring employees’ use of company computers and the internet. (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2005, from [http://www.twc.state.tx.us/news/efte/monitoring\\_computers\\_internet.html](http://www.twc.state.tx.us/news/efte/monitoring_computers_internet.html).

Nesbitt, S. (2001, January 3). Executives spend nearly 2 hours a day on email. Chattanooga Times Free Press, 2.

Nyaw, M. and Ng, I. (1994). Comparative analysis of ethical beliefs: four country study. Journal of Business Ethics, 13: 543-555.

Palmer, I. (2003, August). Email abuse and misuse. Insight Magazine. Retrieved on April 14, 2005, from <http://www.insight-mag.com/insight/03/08/col-5-pt-1-WorkForce.asp?forprint>.

Rathi, N. (2002, May 29). Pandora’s Inbox. Retrieved April 16, 2005, from <http://www.rediff.com/search/2002/may/29war.htm>.

Saint-Cyr, Y. (2004, September). Employees disciplined for inappropriate use of the internet and email. Retrieved May 16, 2005, from <http://www.hrmguide.net/canada/law/inappropriate-use.htm>.

Taylor, D. (2002, April 18). Beware the hidden dangers of e-mail misuse by workers. Computer Weekly, 50.

Websense Inc. (2004). Emerging threats in employee computing. San Diego, CA: Author.

Whipple, T. and Swords, D. (1992). Business ethics judgments: a cross-cultural comparison. Journal of Business Ethics, 11, 671-678.

Wilde, D. (2002, January). Controlling Internet misuse at work. PC Network Advisor, Issue 138, p. 3-6.