Abstract

This thesis discusses ethnographic research carried out in two very different workplaces, one a manufacturing plant, the other an educational organisation, to explore the relationship between the organisational or workplace culture and the role, status\(^1\) and style of email. The research was concerned with looking at the specific functions of email alongside other means of communicating at work and how it was perceived by its users and receivers compared to these other means of communication. It also investigated when and why email was the preferred medium of workplace communication and some of its distinctive stylistic features. In addition to relating these latter to the workplace culture, the effect on email style of sociolinguistic variables was also explored. Pragmatic theories provided the framework for analysing the data which was interpreted from a social interactionist, social constructionist perspective.

A combined corpora of 515 e-mail messages provided the primary linguistic data. This was supplemented by quantitative survey data and qualitative data from observations, two diaries of reflective practice, interviews, and recordings of four people's communicative interactions over one workday. The messages were coded initially for communicative function and then, in order to explore the affective aspect of email communication, for mitigational and boosting elements. In addition to the above, a qualitative analysis of a thread of email messages was undertaken to demonstrate how email communication is used in knowledge creation.

The study found that there was little difference between the two organisations in the communicative functions\(^2\) for which email is used. In both, the transmission and seeking of information is its predominant use followed by the making of requests. However, the two workplaces differed considerably in the use made of email which is shown to be essentially a white-collar mode of communication. But even in the educational organisation where email is used extensively, face to face remains the preferred form of communication and dominates communication time.

The type of organisation also seems to affect the way in which email messages are written. Email messages from the manufacturing plant displayed more features of solidarity than those from the

\(^1\) As used in this research, status refers to the importance of email in relation to other media and how it is perceived by its users.
educational organisation. There was a much higher use of greetings in these messages and more direct language forms. The messages were also longer. There was also a difference between the two workplaces in male and female style. Women in the educational organisation wrote longer messages and used more affective features in their emails than their male counterparts. The converse was true in the manufacturing plant.

Stylistically, email directives were seen, in general, to lie midway between the mainly direct forms of spoken communication and the mainly indirect forms of other types of written communication.

The study also found that as part of its communicative functions, email plays an important role in organisational knowledge creation, and that in addition to being a useful communication tool assisting in the functional work of an organisation, it does considerable relational work. This has implications for the way in which email messages are written.

1 Also referred to as discourse or discursive functions.