
An international study of dysfunctional e-mail usage and attitudes among managers

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Abstract: There is a rich body of literature regarding the choice of medium for business communications. Much of this literature seeks to understand the choice and usage of, and attitudes towards, differing media. Theories about the choice of using electronic media range from symbolism, message equivocality, the distance between message partners, the number of message partners, the perceived richness of the media, and the attitudes of message recipients (Trevino *et al.*, 2000). The past few years have seen the choice of electronic media, specifically e-mail, grow enormously. Increasingly, the advantages of e-mail seem to be linked to dysfunctional behaviour and attitudes. This study explores these questions with a survey of 750 European business executives. The survey specifically focuses on identifying dysfunctional usage and attitudes among a cross-section of managers who routinely use e-mail for their work in large firms.

Keywords: electronic communication; e-mail usage; media attitudes; mobile workers; cross cultural communication.

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1 Introduction

The number of person-to-person e-mails sent on an average day was expected to exceed 36 billion worldwide in 2005. E-mail is clearly important for linking colleagues and businesses to their clients, particularly for mobile workers. E-mail is now a simple and ubiquitous tool for the transmission of business plans, proposals, product information and

other typical business communications. But simplicity and popularity do not protect this communication medium from the development of dysfunctional behaviours and attitudes in its users. As e-mail becomes an increasingly instant and personal channel with the growth of the popular 'smartphones' developed by companies like Palm and Blackberry, it is also becoming more aggressive and irritating as unnecessary messages account for larger percentages of e-mail traffic.

Perhaps surprisingly, the invasive inundation of spam-type messages may not be the principal problem. Spam-filtering software helps many businesses and individual managers control this nuisance. What is less controlled is the inappropriate use of e-mail by our corporate colleagues and in our established customer relationships. It is this population of e-mail users that Human Resource Development (HRD) managers largely ignore in their training efforts. Managers, after being given the basic instructions about using e-mail software, are rarely instructed in the 'art of e-mail'. Presumably, HRD professionals either assume that it is inappropriate to teach what is often called netiquette, or hesitate to intrude too deeply into the region of personal style and prerogative. But the growing awareness of these problems is moving many HRD and communication researchers in their position on etiquette training 'from nice to necessary' (Preece, 2004).

Added to the general need to improve online etiquette is the growing importance of e-mail in bridging time and distance within global companies (Ross, 2001). Speaking, listening to, and writing a foreign language is sometimes more difficult than reading one. For those who find this true, e-mail can reduce their embarrassment, increase their ability to understand internal corporate or external client information, and speed up cross-time-zone communication. But any communication across cultures exposes both senders and receivers to misunderstandings arising from a cultural interpretation of the communication, in addition to any mistranslations of the words. Furthermore, e-mail penetration and usage rates vary from country to country.

This study is designed to examine these issues, and therefore focuses on identifying the dysfunctional behaviour and attitudes of a cross-national sample of managers who use e-mail in their daily work. This empirical research therefore helps fill some of the gaps in our knowledge and understanding of this important communication medium.

2 Background

E-mail usage is the focus of dozens of academic articles and thousands of journalistic articles and reviews. Without doubt, the popularity of this communication medium fuels this interest. For example, a search last year on Google (August 2004) of the term 'e-mail use' resulted in 88 000 references. The same search this year (October 2005) returned 397 000 references. Even given the massive search capacity of Google's servers, this is an enormous increase. But research on the cross-cultural aspects of e-mail usage, while growing, is still less available. A Google search for the term 'international e-mail use' returned only three references last year and only seven this year. Understanding how e-mail is used by foreign colleagues and customers is important for the effective operation of any sales campaign, business plan development or product design process.

The academic study of the choice and functionality of business communication channels tends to centre on a handful of theoretical perspectives. In a recent review of some of this literature, Salmon and Joiner (2005,p.56) identify eight commonly used theoretical perspectives among communication channel researchers. These include

media richness and communication channel choice (Daft and Lengel, 1984; 1986); social influence (Fulk, 1993); media features (El-Shinnawy and Markus, 1998); media symbolism (Trevino *et al.*, 1987; 1990); situational factors (Rice, 1992); social presence (Rice, 1993); channel expansion (Carlson and Zmud, 1999); and communication genres (Yates *et al.*, 1999). Salmon and Joiner (2005) selected three of these perspectives for deeper examination, specifically media richness, media features and situational determinant theories.

Briefly, these three theories focus on matching the communication channel used with the content of the message to be transmitted, the usability (both in the present and in the future, where some archival functionality is desired) of the channel, and the situation (geographic or task) of the senders and receivers. Salmon and Joiner (2005) tested seven specific hypotheses related to the functionality of e-mail in specific managerial contexts (Table 1).

Table 1 Salmon and Joiner findings

<i>Tested hypotheses</i>	<i>Empirical results</i>
The higher the management information equivocality, the more likely managers would prefer richer communication channels.	Partially confirmed
Receiving equivocal information through richer channels increases managerial performance.	Confirmed
Written communication is preferred to verbal communication.	Partially confirmed
E-mail is preferred to hard copy communication.	Not confirmed
Telephone communication will be the least preferred communication channel.	Confirmed
E-mail preference is inversely related to physical distance between communicating parties.	Not confirmed
High task uncertainty increases managerial preference for richer communication channels.	Confirmed

The findings of Salmon and Joiner (2005) are mixed. In summary, they find that managers prefer to communicate information that is easily misinterpreted using a richer communication medium, such as face-to-face or by telephone, rather than by e-mail or paper copies. Furthermore, they find that the ease of transferring large amounts of information to many recipients, leaving a record of its passage, was not appreciated by managers, many of whom still preferred verbal communication by phone. Finally, they find that neither increased distance between communicating parties nor increased task risk increases e-mail usage.

Joining these theoretical and empirical studies concerning the choice of communication channel are studies examining specific problems of effectiveness when crossing boundaries such as work and organisational units, structures, technologies and national borders. Shapiro *et al.* (2002) found evidence that effort-withholding behaviours such as loafing, shirking and free-riding may increase in transnational teams linked together through electronic communications. Hinds and Kiesler (1995) found that flatter hierarchical layers in organisations lead to more lateral communication patterns, which tend to use voice media, and that higher-level managers generally prefer voice media also for all of their communications. Ross (2001) examined how national culture acts to filter messages using electronic channels. Brazel *et al.* (2004) found that auditors who

knew that their work would be reviewed in a face-to-face meeting generally produced high-quality reports but less efficiently than those who were not reviewed or electronically reviewed. Finally, Huang *et al.* (2003) examine cultural influences on e-mail acceptance to facilitate organisational technological diffusion. These studies offer ample evidence that the distance-spanning advantages of e-mail communication are not cost free.

In the face of these findings, it appears that even as e-mail usage increases, there are still significant dysfunctional aspects which impede its adoption as a business tool. Perhaps there are usage patterns or attitudes towards e-mail communication that are not fully captured by the typical models used to test the dominant electronic communication theories. To explore this avenue, a study was conducted which surveyed European managers about their attitudes about e-mail, about their colleagues who send e-mail, and about their behaviours vis-à-vis e-mail. The research was guided by an interest in the telephone-like personal communication similarities of e-mail that can be received continually using the new smartphone devices, like the Treo 650 and Blackberry devices and services that integrate e-mail and voice technology. E-mail sent immediately to an 'always on' smartphone offers the immediacy of being able to ask a quick question discreetly by e-mail to a respondent otherwise unavailable to answer a verbal call. This may be able to psychologically enhance the 'media richness' of these very personal e-mails because, like nicknames among close friends, the use of these messages would be signs of emotional closeness and trust.

3 Research instrument and sample

The instrument was designed to explore the attitudes and behaviours of European managers who routinely use e-mail in their work in companies employing more than 500 people. The telephone survey was conducted by a professional survey research firm, Dynamic Markets, in 2004. The sample includes a variety of industry sectors, with a mixture of employees at different levels of seniority. Thirty percent of the interviews were held with senior managers, 47% with middle managers and 23% with junior managers. Seven hundred and fifty people were surveyed across France, Italy, Germany, Spain and the UK.

In addition to general demographic information, the instrument asked questions about what irritated managers about e-mail, how they felt about checking their e-mail, what they thought about the senders of poorly written e-mail and whether e-mail helped to speed up decision making (Table 2).

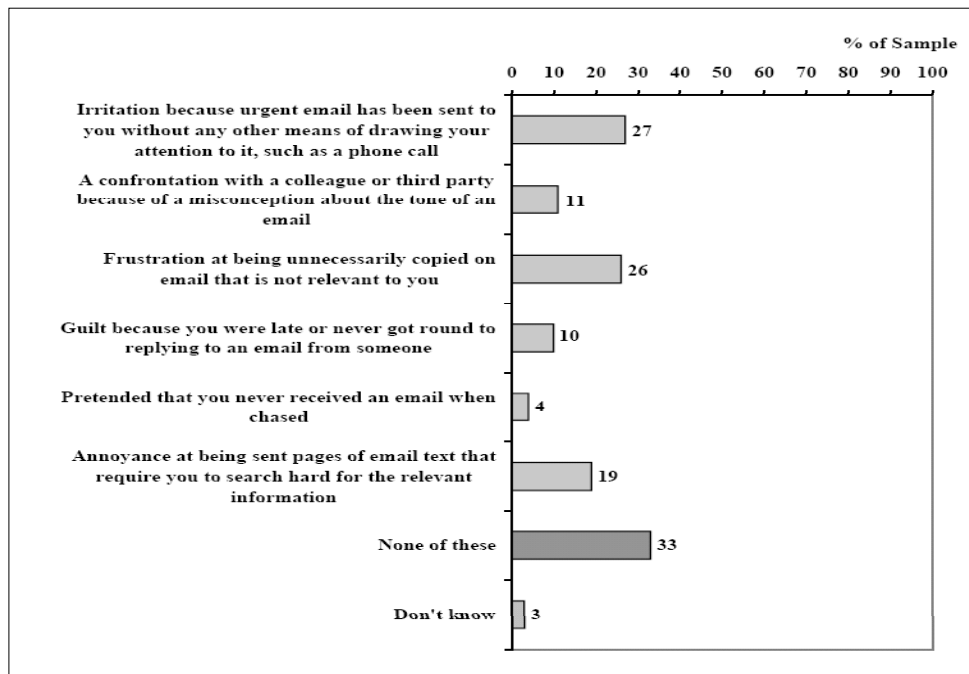
Table 2 Principle questions in the survey instrument

<i>Questions asked</i>
When it comes to using e-mail at work, which of the following have you experienced? (followed by list)
What do you think about the sender when you receive an e-mail at work that is badly written with spelling and grammar mistakes throughout? (followed by list)
What percentage of the e-mails you send do you have to chase for a response?
Do you think some decisions at work get delayed because of waiting for people to reply to e-mails that they have been sent/copied in on?
When it comes to checking your e-mail, do you: (followed by list)

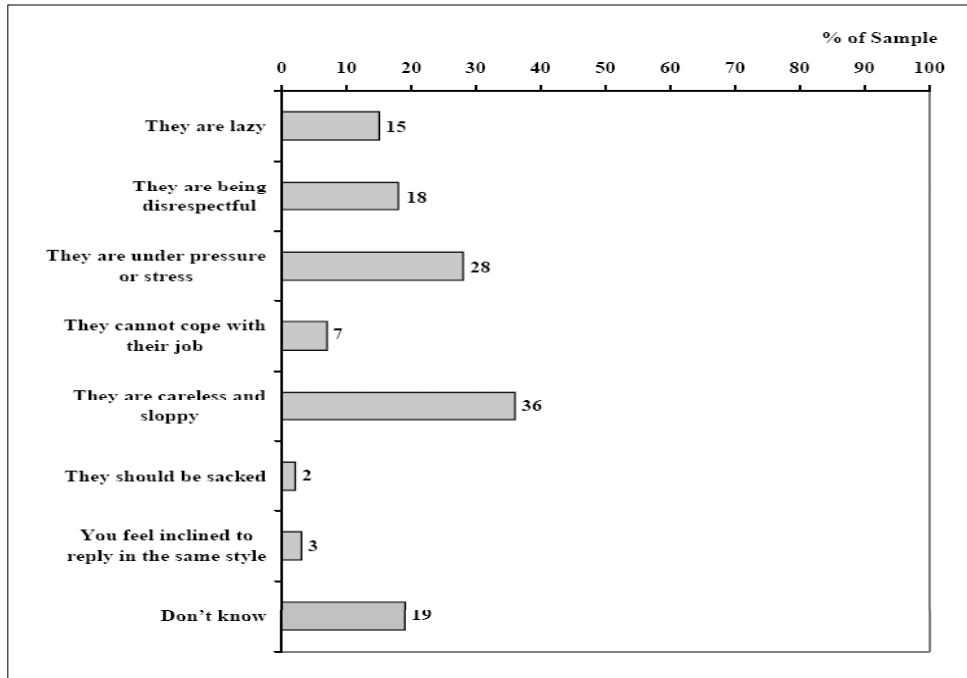
4 Overall results

The overall results are displayed in Figures 1 through 5. These results offer a different perspective from previous academic research. What is striking is that 64% of our sample have experienced dysfunctional behaviour or attitudes towards e-mail usage (Figure 1). Interestingly, the two most-cited irritations are not being made aware of an urgent e-mail waiting in the inbox and having too many unnecessary e-mails waiting there. The ease of sending e-mails probably facilitated their growth in number, thereby pushing out more important communication. Furthermore, between 10% and 19% of the sample suffered negative feelings from their e-mail correspondence. These feelings ranged from irritation resulting from poorly structured e-mail messages to personal conflict arising from misunderstood e-mails, to guilt for not having replied to e-mails.

Figure 1 Experience of using e-mail whilst at work



Senders of e-mail should be aware that casual informality may not be interpreted positively. Nearly 81% of the sample reported negative attitudes towards the senders of e-mail that were poorly written or contained spelling and grammar errors (Figure 2). Between 7% and 36% of the respondents attributed these faults to the incapacity or disrespect of the sender.

Figure 2 Attitudes towards the sender of badly composed e-mail

One might reason that the speed and efficiency of moving large amounts of information could compensate for the negative feelings accompanying it. Unfortunately, this is not immediately evident from our sample. Nearly 79% of the respondents reported that they still needed to chase after their correspondents to obtain an answer to their e-mails (Figure 3).

Twenty-five percent indicated that they must chase after 50% or more of their e-mailed questions or demands. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 61% of the respondents believed that waiting for e-mailed responses slowed down decision making in their firms (Figure 4).

This waiting is evidently not associated with people ignoring their e-mail. Sixty-two percent of the respondents say they feel the need to read an e-mail as soon as it arrives in their e-mail mailbox (Figure 5). Between 17% and 20% feel the need to check their e-mail while away from their desk, believing that they are likely to miss something important. Between 11% and 14% dread or feel overwhelmed by a box full of e-mail demanding their attention.

Figure 3 Percentage of e-mail where a response needs to be chased

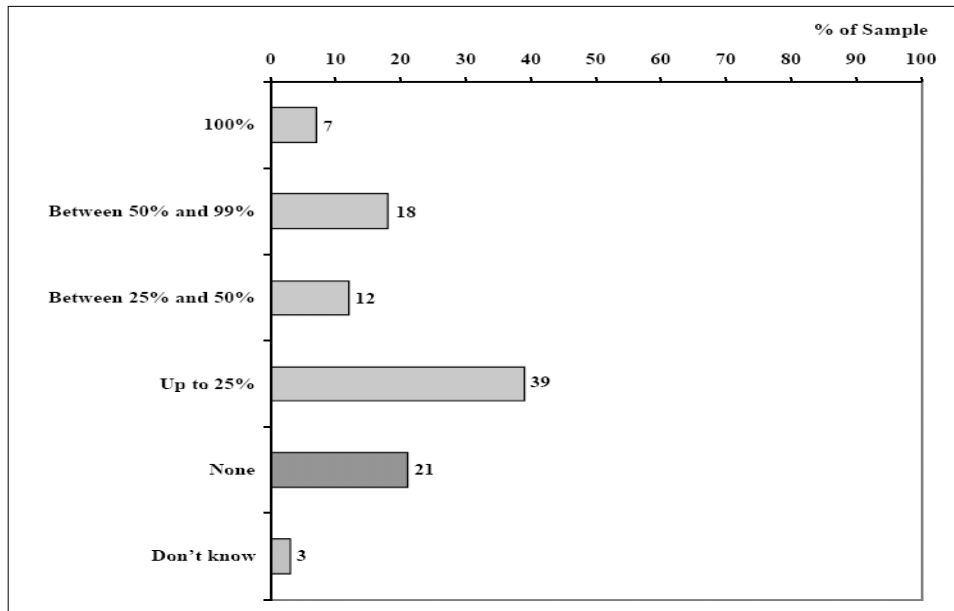


Figure 4 Delayed decisions caused by people not responding to e-mail

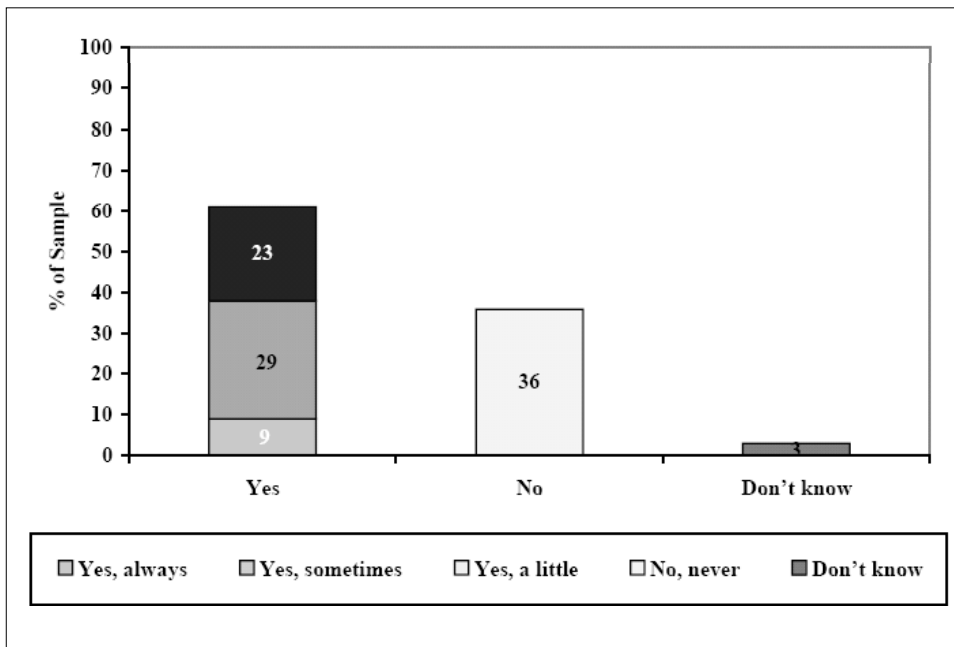
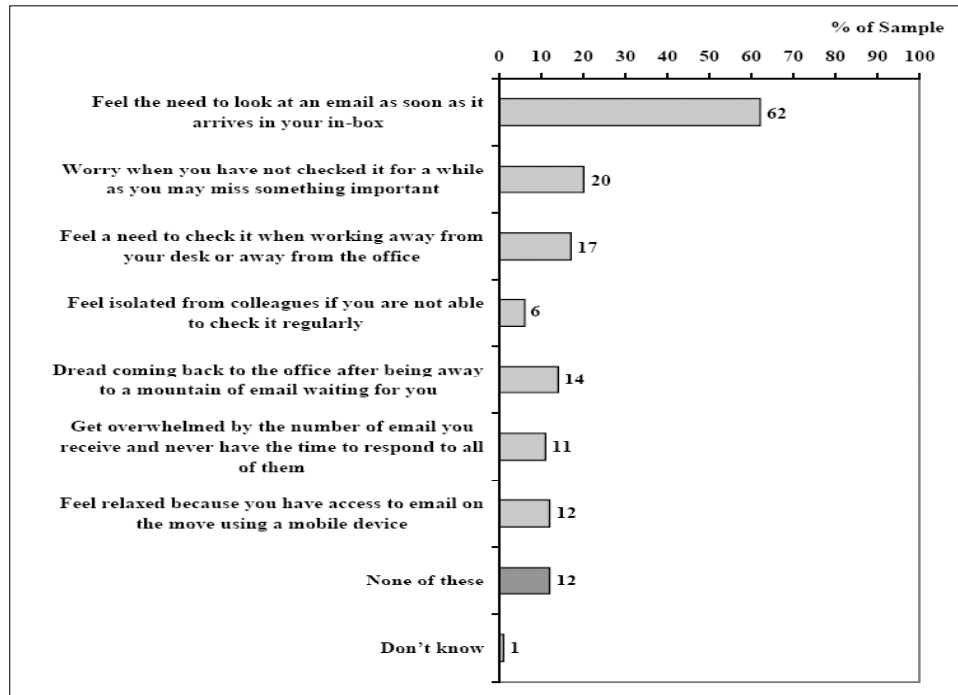


Figure 5 Behaviour associated with checking e-mail

The overall pattern of these results suggests that while e-mail usage is the dominant communication channel in firms employing more than 500 people, it is not necessarily the preferred way of communicating. This observation supports the findings of Salmon and Joiner (2005), who find that rich communication media is sometimes deemed more suitable for certain types of information.

5 Cultural differences in the results

The overall results of this study clearly indicate that the reality of e-mail usage is not always captured by our theoretical models. This is perhaps not too surprising, given that many of our models were developed years ago when managers still faced the choice of using a telephone, fax or e-mail. The choices today, however, are more legally limited or are prescribed by corporate policies. Nevertheless, it is still useful to examine our data country by country to tease out differences that may illustrate the human preferences inherent in the usage and attitudes towards e-mail.

5.1 France

The French are the most likely to get very annoyed about urgent e-mails that are not marked urgent or followed-up with a phone call. They also have a more pessimistic attitude about the failures that arise from e-mail. Nearly 75% think that decisions are delayed because people are waiting for a reply to e-mails, whereas only about 55% of respondents in other countries believe this.

The French are unhappy to receive long messages requiring them to search laboriously through the e-mail for relevant information. While 33% of the French respondents cite this problem, only 7% of the British found this annoying. Managers in France are the most impatient and the most curious of all those surveyed – 86% of them report feeling compelled to look at an e-mail the moment it arrives. This is in marked contrast to managers from other countries, where the average percentage is 53%.

Sloppy e-mails are poorly received by French managers. Forty-five percent of them take spelling and grammatical errors as a sign of disrespect. In contrast, only about 7% of Italian, Spanish or British managers think the same way. The readiness of the French to interpret sloppy e-mails this way may be related to the relative precision demanded by the French language. If you are unwilling to carefully present your idea, product or request, it is felt that you probably do not respect the person to whom you are sending the e-mail.

5.2 *Germany*

Like the French, the Germans get annoyed by reading through long e-mail messages. But in other respects they are rather different. For example, almost 25% of the German sample experienced a confrontation with a colleague or customer because of a misunderstanding that arose over the tone of an e-mail. Only about 6% of the French, Italian or Spanish managers reported the same problem. The tone of an e-mail – whether it is friendly, respectful and business like – is important to everyone, but it is something that matters even more to the Germans.

When the Germans receive e-mail messages that contain spelling and grammatical errors, they are much more likely to interpret these as a sign of laziness – for example, while 27% of the German sample use this explanation, the average for the other European countries is closer to 12%.

5.3 *Italy*

If there is one thing the Italians dislike about e-mail, it is receiving a copy of a message that has nothing to do with them. While 34% of Italians cite this as a major irritant, it is mentioned, on average, by only 24% of the respondents in the other countries.

Forty-five percent of Italians interpret spelling and grammatical errors as a sign of carelessness and sloppiness, while the average for France, Germany and the UK is closer to 30%. But Italians are the most charitable, since 40% also believe that this is caused by too much pressure and stress. Respondents from other countries site this explanation only 25% of the time.

Italians are also unusual in other respects. When asked about the problem of not getting a response, the Italians reported that, on average, they have to chase after 60% of the e-mails they send. This is more than twice the frequency reported by the Spaniards (29%) and the French (26%), and three times the frequency mentioned by the Germans (19%) and the British (13%). This also implies that Italians are the least likely to respond to an e-mail request.

The Italians may not like being physically separated from other people since 10% of them report feeling isolated if they cannot check their e-mail regularly. In absolute terms, this is a small percentage, but it is double the European average.

5.4 *Spain*

Like the French, the Spaniards are annoyed about wading through e-mails looking for the relevant information. Almost 25% cite this as a problem while on average only 15% of German, Italian and British managers cite this problem.

In other respects, Spaniards and Italians share many attitudes. Forty-three percent of the Spaniards and 43% of the Italians attribute spelling and grammatical errors to carelessness and sloppiness. The French, German and UK average is closer to 30%.

Dealing with e-mail demands puts the Spaniards under pressure. Eighteen percent report that they feel overwhelmed by the number of e-mails they receive and the fact that they never have enough time to respond to them all. This sense of frustration is much higher among the Spaniards and the French (15%) than with other European managers, among whom the average is only 8%. This may be why 20% of the Spanish dread being away from their office and coming back to a mailbox crammed with waiting e-mails. Interestingly, only 49% of the Spanish respondents (as opposed to an average over all countries surveyed of 65%) felt the need to promptly respond to e-mail, so perhaps the backlog just continues to grow.

5.5 *UK*

While e-mail for the British manager is less likely to create confrontations because of a misinterpreted tone than to a German (14% and 23%, respectively), it is much higher than for French (5%), Italian (5%) and Spanish (5%) managers. In other ways too the British are quite different. Eleven percent of the British respondents admit they sometimes lied about getting an e-mail that they in fact received. Although this is not a very large percentage, it is much higher than for French (3%), German (1%), Italian (3%) and Spanish (4%) managers.

When it comes to explaining why people send e-mails full of spelling and grammatical errors, the British (19%) and French (15%) believe that poor e-mail quality is due to too much stress or pressure. The British show the least need to chase after e-mails. Only 21% of the British managers found following-up a problem, with 35% reporting that they never have the problem of chasing after their e-mails. Although the British show the least concern about having to chase up e-mails, they are the most worried when it comes to dealing with a backlog of e-mails. In fact, 25% of the British sample report that they dread coming back to the office after being away because they then have to deal with the mountain of e-mail waiting for them. The average percentage of people in the other countries who express this concern is only 11%.

6 Summary of international comparisons

One of the biggest complaints is receiving long, poorly organised e-mails where the essential information is hard to find. This disturbs the Spaniards and Italians the most (45%) and the French and Germans the least (18%). Another major complaint is urgent e-mail not accompanied by a phone call. This bothers managers everywhere but most of all the French (33%). The other side of receiving multiple notices is ignoring e-mail in your box. This creates guilt and lies. The French feel the least guilt and lie the least (9%), while the English feel the most guilt and lie the most (24%). Another big irritation for

European managers, especially the Italians (34%), is being unnecessarily included in the CC list for an e-mail that has nothing to do with them. Perhaps the 'reply all' command needs to be deeply buried in a submenu so it is less often used.

The managers also commented on what they thought about the senders of poorly written e-mail. The Germans, Spaniards and Italians are the least forgiving; more than 56% thought bad writing and grammatical errors were signs of lazy, careless and sloppy managers. The British are more generous with only 46% thinking the same thing. However, the French are by far the most gracious, with only 36% suspecting that the sender was not quite up to the task of elegant prose. Nevertheless, do not let this politeness fool you; nearly half of the French managers attribute bad writing to being disrespectful of them.

Many managers develop a love-hate relationship with e-mail. Eighty-six percent of the French and 64% of the Germans and Spanish feel compelled to read their e-mail as soon as it arrives. By contrast, less than half of the British and Italian want to stay virtually connected. Nearly 25% of the British, however, hate to go back to their offices on Monday morning because of their dread of a mountain of e-mails waiting to be opened.

7 Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study affirm that doing business across borders requires multiple communication channels. Furthermore, we must assume that our e-mail messages will not always have the effect we want. However, clarity, precision and economy are still important allies when communicating. What appears to be necessary is to tie on some specific training on how to use e-mail and the development of some e-mail wisdom. Both of these can be significantly advanced by effective human resource development processes. If we do not encourage better training we may fall into one lament often heard by managers: "...I send all my messages on paper and by e-mail because half of my colleagues never read their e-mail and half never read paper mail..."

This problem may be further complicated by the increased tenacity of electronic delivery channels coupled with increasing intolerance with unnecessary, unimportant, uninteresting or unreadable e-mail. HRD professionals must create and nurture communities of good practice among their colleagues and clients. As communication channels continue to evolve and make 'communication on demand' a reality through personally carried devices incorporating phones, e-mails, and SMS messages, these needs can only grow. It is up to HRD professionals to help insure that European managers can effectively receive, understand and act on the messages coming at them from all sides.

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