

Electronic Mail and Work-Life Balance at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst

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Over the past two decades, the use of electronic mail (email) has become ubiquitous (Paul 2003). This is true for the larger U.S. culture, corporations, and universities and colleges. Despite the extensive use of email, the development of policies, rules, and email etiquette have developed haphazardly (Raskano 2003; Renaud et al 2006). As a result, individuals are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of email they receive and how to handle it. This is a prevalent sentiment among UMass faculty.

As part of the Work-Life Caregiver Equity Study, UMass faculty were surveyed and participated in focus groups over the 2008-2009 academic year.¹ The faculty who participated in the focus groups identified email as one of the more stressful factors of their work responsibilities. Email was frequently identified as a primary culprit causing the “bleed” between work and non-work life, since email “follows” workers home. This report will focus on the potential problems unfettered email expectations can cause, as well as simple solutions the University can implement to streamline communication, reduce work-life stress, and improve workplace conditions.

Major findings from this report include:

- Without set email protocols, students’ expectations for immediate response from their professors is unrealistically high. The same is sometimes true for faculty-to-faculty email communications.
- Student overreliance on email to contact their professors sometimes leads to unnecessary miscommunications. Email also lowers the quality of student-instructor communication of the kind that is better suited to face-to-face interaction
- Emails sent by students and colleagues after work hours and over weekends results in frequent feelings of “email invasion.” This ubiquitous nature of email is a major factor in faculty work-life boundary blurring.

Background

Nationwide, the most common university and policies regarding email focus on the potential legal liabilities of electronic mail. For example, current UMass policies regarding email address confidentiality and privacy, rules regarding sexist or racist content, copyright rules, and informing students that all “official” university

¹ The librarians who participated in this study expressed less concern about being overwhelmed by email than the tenure track and contract faculty. A forthcoming report scheduled for Spring 2010 will focus specifically on librarians’ concerns.

announcements will be sent to university email accounts.² These policies are similar to the policies of many other universities.

The University of Massachusetts-Amherst does set out expectations for email distribution lists.³ “Official” university mailing lists have no “opt-out” feature, although the use of “official” mailing lists is limited to urgent messages. This policy also specifies the rules and expectations for distribution lists that reach a smaller segment of the university population. Included in these expectations is a suggestion of brevity, limiting or eliminating attachments, and the expectation that the owner of the list is expected to “maintain appropriate use.”

These policies do not address expectations between faculty and undergraduates or among faculty (i.e. intra-departmental or collegial emails).⁴ And yet, it is this kind of interactive email correspondence, where response is expected within a window of time, that may cause the most stress. Using monitoring equipment on computers, research shows that academics checked their emails between 30 to 40 times per hour, disrupting workflow and reducing productivity (Reynaud et al. 2003). Reynaud et al. (2003, p. 313) argue that email needs to be controlled in order “to ensure that email remains a tool rather than a tyrant.” Similarly, a study (Ostlerlund and Robson 2009, p. 236) examining email usage for teaching assistants (TAs) found that TAs who also held office hours reported feeling “overburdened” by student emails, and that social science and arts TAs felt that student emails significantly increased their workload.

Jacobs (2004) highlights that email has created a new set of expectations about response time and availability for university faculty and instructors; namely that faculty are expected to respond immediately and to be available at all hours of the day. While email may increase the amount of communication between students and faculty, it can also create communication that is condensed, low-quality, and superficial (Menzie & Newson 2007).

Research documenting the constant nature of electronic communication finds that it blurs the boundaries between work and home. Sixty percent of workers, for example, report checking their email while on vacation (America Online, 2005) and a recent report from the U.S. Department of Commerce indicates that thirty-seven percent of employed adults who use a computer at work also do so at home (U.S. Department of Commerce 2002). Similarly, Bugeja (2006) points out the email can result in feeling “stalked” through a vacation, can encourage thoughtless or tactless responses, and can undermine effective communication between colleagues. New research has begun to investigate the way in which email intensifies existing pedagogical problems in educational settings and sometimes leads to altogether new ones (Osterlund and Robson 2008).

²http://www.oit.umass.edu/policies/acceptable_use/policy.html;
http://www.oit.umass.edu/policies/acceptable_use/guidelines.html; and
http://www.oit.umass.edu/policies/email_comm/policy.html.

[Accessed August 24th, 2009.]

³ http://www.oit.umass.edu/policies/email_dist.html. [Accessed August 24th, 2009.]

⁴ There is, however, a seminar offered to UMass employees through the Workplace Learning & Development Office called Manage Email and Information Overload. This seminar provides techniques to better manage the demands of email, but it is an optional seminar aimed predominantly at staff and it is not clear how extensively it has been utilized on campus

Email also creates unattainable expectations regarding response time, availability, and communication. Some corporations (for example, U.S. Cellular) have begun to address the workplace issues email can cause. Such businesses have created policies such as “no-email” Fridays, which require employees to use other methods of communication (face-to-face or the phone) to reach coworkers. This simple policy reduces email and encourages workers to develop additional methods of communication with co-workers (Horing 2007).

Although most of the faculty dialogue on email during the focus groups was negative, it is important to add that some faculty survey respondents mentioned email as an important means for allowing them to work from home during periods of intensive caregiving. Given the potential for email to help keep faculty connected to colleagues and students, we argue it is important to minimize the negative aspects of electronic mail within the university community. We will first describe the methods used for this project and then provide possible policy recommendations that the administration of UMass could implement with little financial cost.

Methods

Most of the data in this report come from six focus groups for faculty held in April of 2009 and sponsored by the Joint Administration-MSP Work-Life committee (see Templer 2009 for more detail about the data and methods). All associate, assistant, and contract faculty members and all librarians were sent an email invitation to participate in the focus groups; over a hundred faculty and librarians responded to the invitation and sixty-five (77) participated. Focus group participants worked in small groups of three to five (3-5) for the first fifteen to twenty (15-20) minutes. Each group answered the following two questions: (1) What challenges have you experienced regarding work-life balance while employed at the University of Massachusetts? (2) What types of programs, services, and/or other support would help you most in terms of navigating work-life balance? Groups answered these questions on a worksheet and were asked to rank the most pressing issues and the solutions they would most like to see implemented. After working in small groups a larger group discussion was facilitated by a representative from the faculty union and a representative from the administration.

Some of these data in this report also come from a campus-wide survey, which was collected in two waves. Three hundred and forty nine faculty completed surveys, a thirty (30) percent response rate, which is about average for online surveys (Shih and Fan 2009).

Findings

Even though there was no specific question in the focus groups asking about email, it was consistently raised unsolicited as a problematic work-life issue in group discussions. One faculty member, in fact, described email as “one of the banes of my life” (April 28). Faculty concerns about email arose naturally in the course of conversation in all but one faculty focus group, with the focus group facilitator asking follow-up questions as appropriate.

A recurring theme throughout six of the seven faculty focus groups was the overwhelming nature of email and its distinct role in blurring the lines between work and non-work hours. Faculty described email in terms such as: “truly overwhelming”, “24/7”,

“massive amounts”, “excessive”, and “an overload.” Many faculty noted that the high volume of email from colleagues and students generates an all-encompassing email culture, seeping into time outside of work. For example, faculty members commented on how email can lead to more work, turning “home into workplace” (April 30) and ramps up expectations that there should be “24/7 access” to faculty (April 3). Multiple faculty reported that because students and colleagues send email at all times, they feel obligated to be “answering email on weekends and evenings” (April 7), as well as during the “summer when we are not supposed to be working here.” (April 30). Another participant noted that while email has sped up communication, the downside is that it “very often spills into home life.” (April 10). Making the point that email exacerbates an already “workaholic” culture, another faculty member said: “Email makes it worse. You can take it [work] home with you, *and* be reached about it.” (April 7)

Faculty concerns over email primarily fell into two categories: 1) student expectations and 2) colleague expectations. Faculty argued that undergraduates’ and graduate students’ email expectations were unrealistic. Students often email for information that is readily available (online or in the syllabus); email rather than come to office hours; expect immediate responses; and expect responses at all hours. Some students “freak out” (April 28) when their email expectations are not met and one professor described the deluge of student emails as “overwhelming” (April 10). This combination can cause interpersonal problems between faculty and students, diminish undergraduate classroom experiences, and cause high levels of faculty stress.

While several faculty noted that they set limitations on email access (such as a 24-hour response time) either through their syllabus or announcements in class, they found, however, that setting these individual limitations was more likely to lead to negative student evaluations regarding the faculty member’s availability and accessibility for students. For new and untenured faculty, poor scores on teaching evaluations can have serious consequences. Several focus groups recommended a standard university policy outlining reasonable expectations for communication between faculty and undergraduates so that individual faculty are not penalized for being unable to respond to emails “sent at 1a.m. by 8:30 a.m. the next morning” (April 28).

Similar issues arose when faculty referred to email communication within their department or between colleagues. Some felt that fellow faculty members and administrators expect instant responses at all hours of the day, including when faculty are at home for the evenings or weekends. Additionally, faculty and administrators often send attachments late in the day for meetings that are happening the next morning, expecting colleagues to prepare for meetings in the evenings. As one faculty member stated, “[they think] because they can send you an attachment instantly, you can read it instantly” (April 7). Another untenured faculty member described just how extensive the consequences can be for unmet email expectations:

I am in the process of writing a large grant. I went out of town to Boston on Friday and one of my collaborators emailed me at 9am, and then sent three other emails. By 3 pm, she emailed back to say she would no longer collaborate because I had not responded to her email. I was out of town! (April 28)

Given the importance of bringing grants into the university system, these expectations had serious repercussions for this faculty member. When focus group members were asked if they set limitations with peers (as some do with undergraduates), none of the

participants admitted to setting such rules, and many expressed discomfort at the prospect of establishing similar guidelines with their colleagues.

In the quantitative surveys sent out earlier in the academic year, information on faculty email usage was unfortunately not collected directly. Instead, in assessing work time estimates, we included email in each of the professional activities as one task among many. For example, we categorized time spent teaching as *“teaching undergraduate & graduate courses or independent studies, teaching preparation, grading, emailing & office hours”* and time spent in service as *“serving on committees, attending meetings, emailing, organizing or participating in workshops or forums, mentoring and advising other faculty members, participating in faculty senate, & holding MSP leadership positions.”* Our wording is a reflection of the ubiquity of electronic communication in all facets of academic work life; however, after seeing how important an issue email turned out to be in the focus groups, we recommend in the future that time spent specifically on email be a point of focus. The long work hours of faculty (reported in Misra et al. 2009), are likely a function, in part, of email.

The issues surrounding email are so prevalent that they arose of their own accord during not only the focus groups but also in the open-ended survey components of this project. Even though we did not solicit specific email-related responses in the survey, faculty frequently wrote in email issues as part of the fill-in-the-blank sections of the survey. Under “please feel free to share any other relevant information that you were unable to fit elsewhere in the survey”, one respondent wrote “I feel like I spend much more time at meetings and doing email than I could have ever imagined in grad school.” Another respondent echoed the boundary-blurring theme we heard in the focus groups, by writing that even when s/he was with family, s/he is often:

...doing email and other work at home while I am ostensibly spending ‘quality time’ with them. I felt that the survey couldn’t quite capture the complexities of this kind of daily juggling act where categories bleed into each other.

In the section of the survey that addressed “time reported spent doing “other” forms of professional work”, thirty-one respondents wrote in time spent emailing. About half of these respondents were reporting their weekend work. One person went on to specify: “Emails come in 24/7 and I respond to issues as they arise, even if it’s on the weekends.” Another wrote: “Emails come in such a volume that I really don’t have a reflective sense of how I parse my time on them.”

The stress from unfettered email is high enough that when we asked faculty in the focus groups for potential solutions to the problem, a number jokingly suggested that the server be shut down at 6pm. In fact, the potential solutions to the problems discussed in this report are relatively simple and inexpensive to implement. In the next section, we discuss these solutions for intra-departmental communication⁵ and for student/faculty interactions.

Recommendations

⁵ We were tasked with a survey focused on MSP members, but these solutions are also applicable to UMass administration and staff.

Adopt an Official Email Protocol: While the university cannot enforce an email protocol, it can certainly publicize its efforts to reduce unnecessary email strain and post a suggested standard protocol for recommended email usage on the university web site. Department chairs, faculty and staff can refer to this protocol as a way to legitimate their own efforts to reduce email overload. We suggest some basic guidelines, which could potentially transform the current university email culture.

For professionals within a department (collegial): We suggest that faculty be encouraged to adopt a “no email response” policy during nights and weekends. Faculty members who choose to compose emails during non-work hours might consider simply saving their outgoing emails in the draft file and sending them out during regular work hours (this can also be set up automatically in many email programs). Expectations should be that faculty respond to emails between 9am and 5pm on Monday through Friday with at least a forty-eight hour lag time. We also suggest a policy whereby attachments necessary for meetings should be sent forty-eight (48) hours ahead of a meeting time.

As an alternative to large group emails with ongoing and complex threads, we suggest the adoption of “opt-in wikis.” These wiki discussion groups allow individuals to seek out and take part in discussions they want to be a part of in an organized and transparent way (Arconati 2009).⁶ A standardized email protocol should also remind faculty to make an effort to reduce group reply emails except when necessary, to resist the urge to send trivial email, and to try to replace more detailed or sensitive email interactions with face to face meetings or phone calls where possible.

Department chairs could be especially encouraged to adopt these measures in their own electronic communications with faculty so as to set an example for the department as a whole. Seminars, such as the *Manage Email and Information Overload* class sponsored by the UMass Workplace Learning & Development Office, could be tailored to departments and utilized on a regular basis. Finally, new faculty could receive information about university email protocol as part of their fall orientation.

For students: Faculty should encourage undergraduates to meet with them during their office hours. Office hours are highly underutilized on campus, most likely because they have been increasingly replaced by email correspondence. Some focus group participants reported that they use a canned reply message to student emails requesting that they come in for an office visit rather than email. Above all, we suggest that the University create a guide to class email etiquette for undergraduates, which should be included in all faculty syllabi. Like the protocol governing faculty-to-faculty electronic communication, this should also be posted on the university web page and included as part of student orientation.

Below is a sample of suggested etiquette rules⁷:

- Expect faculty to respond to emails between 9am and 5pm on Monday through Friday with a forty-eight hour lag time. Treat your professor (and fellow students) with respect, even in email.

⁶ See <http://www.ikiw.org/2009/03/04/wikis-opt-in-culture-contribute-to-a-healthy-organization/> for more information

⁷ Many of these suggestions are adapted from <http://science.kennesaw.edu/~hmattord/email.htm>. [Accessed August 24th, 2009.]

- For any concerns about grades, meet with your professor or TA face-to-face.
- Before sending questions via email, make sure that your question is not answered on the course syllabus or website.
- Use proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Be as specific as possible about the subject of the email in the mail subject heading.

Conclusion

The volume and the function of electronic communication have evolved rapidly in the workplace. This has led to many important innovations in the university setting, but feedback from faculty suggests that without limits, email can take on an unwelcome life of its own. While electronic communication may speed efficiency, this report suggests that this may come at the cost of personal time during the evenings and on weekends, leading to burn-out. Furthermore, when the volume of unregulated email reaches the point where students and colleagues use it in place of other forms of communication, time spent replying to email can just as quickly become counter-productive. In the past, forms of communication were far slower, setting more reasonable expectations for response times and limiting what could be accomplished in non-face to face encounters. As a result, there was little need for an official standardization of such communications. Quickly evolving technologies, however, like email, call for an ongoing and thoughtful consideration of how we can best use them to our advantage. As one faculty member pointed out during a focus group:

I wish there was something the university could do to put limits on this... The university didn't need to worry about it before; it is a product of new technology that allows for instant communication. Think about the days of the memo, 20 years ago, when someone would write a memo, and then put it into campus mail, and it would take a week to get there. (April 28)

To restate our recommendations, we encourage UMass-Amherst to consider:

Creating a standardized protocol for university-wide email interaction. This is a crucial first step in placing limits on email overload and establishing a healthy electronic communication culture for faculty, students, staff and administration.

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