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Unintended consequences of emerging communication technologies: Instant Messaging in the workplace

Ann Frances Cameron, Jane Webster *

School of Business, Queen's University, 143 Union St. Kingston, Ont., Canada K7L 3N6

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Abstract

With increased global connectivity, managers are faced with new technologies and rapid organizational changes. For instance, organizations may adopt emerging technologies such as Instant Messaging in order to increase collaboration at a distance and to decrease communications costs. However, the impact and implications of these technologies for managers and employees often go far beyond the original intent of the technology designers. Consequently, in this study, instant messaging (IM) and its use in organizations were investigated through interviews with employees. Results suggest that critical mass represents an important factor for IM success in the workplace that IM symbolizes informality, and that IM is perceived to be much less rich than face-to-face communication. Further, results demonstrate that employees use IM not only as a replacement for other communication media but as an additional method for reaching others. With IM, employees engage in polychronic communication, view IM as privacy enhancing, and see its interruptive nature as unfair. The paper concludes by discussing research and practice implications for organizational psychologists.

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Keywords: Computer-mediated communication; Electronic monitoring; Media richness; Polychronic communication; Privacy; Fairness

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-613-533-3163; fax: +1-613-533-2325.

E-mail addresses: acameron@business.queensu.ca (A.F. Cameron), jwebster@business.queensu.ca (J. Webster).

1. Introduction

Managers and employees in today's business environments are approaching a technological communication frontier, with a panorama of technologies at their disposal. The workhorses of today's organizations are communication media such as email, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and most recently, Instant Messaging. Market analysts have predicted that corporate Instant Messaging will grow from 18.3 million in 2001 to 229 million users worldwide in 2005 (Mingail, 2001). This sudden and unplanned emergence of corporate Instant Messaging gives rise to many questions regarding its effective use to support organizational communications.

Instant Messaging (IM) represents a communication technology that allows employees to send and receive short text-based messages in real-time and to see who else is 'online' and currently available to receive messages. Based on the 1988 Finnish technology Internet Relay Chat, IM was originally intended to allow home internet users to converse with family and friends (Goldsborough, 2001). However, as managers began to recognize this tool's potential to support informal interactions (Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001; Perry, O'Hara, Sellen, Brown, & Harper, 2001), more and more corporations began installing IM software on employees' workstations. This initial use has since spread outside the organization to communications with customers (Guan & Alkinkemer, 2002).

IM systems differ in two main ways from the chat systems on which they were based. First, IM messages generally arrive singly, while multiple conversations often appear in a scrolling window of the computer screen with chat systems (Segerstad & Ljungstrand, 2002). Second, IM systems contain a presence awareness capability. Presence awareness, also called peripheral awareness (Simone & Bandini, 1997), distributed awareness (Dourish & Bly, 1992), background awareness (Lee, Girgensohn, & Schlueter, 1997), and awareness moments (Nardi et al., 2000), involves having a general sense of who is around and what they are doing (Dourish & Bly, 1992; Zweig & Webster, 2002). Unlike performance monitoring, presence awareness represents a type of peer monitoring designed to enhance communication between colleagues (Zweig & Webster, 2003). With IM, this capability allows users to see status indicators representing other users who are 'online' and currently available to receive messages as well as when they were last actively using the system. Further, the awareness function of some IM products is able to automatically determine when an employee has logged on or logged off his or her computer as well as the amount of time the employee's IM system has remained idle. Some IM systems also allow the employee to turn off the status indicator altogether, denying others access to their presence information.

Although some research has examined chat systems (e.g., Dietz-Uhler & Bishop-Clark, 2001; Orvis, Wisher, Bonk, & Olson, 2002), few studies have examined IM systems in depth (Olson & Olson, 2003) and less is known about how they are actually used in practice (Isaacs, Kamm, Schiano, Walendowski, & Whittaker, 2002). Many of the existing IM studies demonstrate the feasibility of prototype systems rather than examine how IM systems are used in the workplace (Grinter & Palen, 2002). As Handel and Herbsleb (2002) indicate, "important studies of instant mes-

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