Responding to Negatively Emotive E-mails within Organizations: Communicative Strategies and

Their Origins

Angela Stewart

Theodore E. Zorn

University of Waikato

Abstract

This paper reports an exploratory study of emotional communication in the use of e-mail by people in a variety of organizations. Specifically, we explored the strategies people use to respond to negatively emotive e-mails and the origins of these strategies. E-mail communication is emerging as perhaps the foremost method by which people communicate in many organizations. Emotional expression is an important part of any communication and its appropriate use is central to competent communication and to organizational functioning. Since e-mail is a leaner medium than face-to-face (FTF) or phone communication the expression of emotion may be more difficult. However, little research has been conducted on the emotional experience of people when communicating via e-mail. Thematic analysis was performed on the responses from open-ended e-mail surveys of eighteen participants from a variety of organizations. Findings indicated that responses to emotive emails may be seen to reflect two underlying dimensions: reactive-considered and engaging-disengaging. The origin of the strategies for managing emotional expression in e-mails came from a variety of sources, but most frequently, from the participants' personal values and intuition, or their previous experience with the sender, rather than explicit guidelines or policies for e-mail use. Based on these findings, several recommendations for practice and future research are offered.

Responding to Negatively Emotive E-mails within Organizations: Communicative Strategies and

Their Origins

© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

As in the Dilbert cartoon above, most of us have received electronic mail, or e-mail, that

we interpret as emotive—conveying hostility, anger, sarcasm, or perhaps warmth, happiness, or

good will and/or prompting such feelings. Responding to such messages, especially those

expressing or prompting negative emotions, is a challenge, one that requires communication skill

and one that has important personal and organizational consequences.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the ways that individuals in organizations

respond to negatively emotive emails. Specifically, we are interested in the communication

strategies that individuals use in response to such emails and the sources from which they derive

guidance for developing these strategies. The study demonstrates that responses to emotive

emails may be seen to reflect two underlying dimensions: reactive-considered and engaging-

disengaging. Furthermore, emotive communication in the use of e-mail within organizations is

potentially destructive, yet people perceive their organizations to offer little guidance in how to

respond to such messages. Rather, people tend to draw on personal and informal resources to

construct a variety of strategic responses.

This study is important for several reasons. First, e-mail has become a ubiquitous part of the organizational communication landscape. E-mail is the most commonly used form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the workplace (Garton & Wellman, 1995) and it has become a widespread and frequently used method by which members of organizations communicate (Fallows, 2002; Hacker, Goss, & Townley, 1998). In many organizational contexts e-mail has become the preferred method of communication, overtaking phone, memo and many FTFencounters (Baron, 1998). Fallows (2002) found that "About 62% of all employed Americans have Internet access and virtually all of those (98%) use e-mail on the job....Most of them use e-mail daily for work tasks" (p. 2).

Not only is e-mail use prominent, so is e-mail *misuse* (Hamel, 2005). In Hamel's survey of 114 organizational members, e-mail misuse was reported as frequently occurring. In Fallows (2002) survey of nearly 2500 people, 22% of people who use e-mail at work say e-mail has caused misunderstandings. Furthermore, Hamel found that the most common type of communication technology misuse was in communicating via e-mail with coworkers about routine work-related matters. The consequences of e-mail misuse are potentially severe. For example, Hamel found that disengaging from the relationship with the misuser was one of the two most common responses to e-mail misuse. In our experience, ill-considered e-mails have also damaged careers and company reputations.

Yet, even though e-mail use and misuse are common and the consequences significant, there have been few studies of the communicative practices of users when confronted with emotive messages (Hamel, 2005). There is extensive research on certain aspects of e-mail communication, such as the linguistic features of e-mail (Baron, 1998), the social impacts of e-mail within organizations (see Garton, 1995), the prevalence of e-mail use, and organizational policies and control (Hacker et al., 1998), but very little attention given to the everyday use of e-

mail in organizations (Friedman & Currall, 2003) and particularly on emotional dimensions of such communication.

Some practical benefits that may be gained from understanding the strategic responses to emotive e-mails include enhanced workplace relations and employee well-being. Strategies that arise from this work may aid in the avoidance of adverse public relations for organizations, decrease bullying and harassment, and limit emotional trauma through misuse of e-mail (Hacker et al., 1998). This investigation of e-mail aims to highlight some of the emotional work that may be taken for granted in a technology that is seen as everyday, and consequently to stimulate scholarly interest in the topic.

In what follows, we briefly review the relevant literature, and then describe the methods used to explore the following two research questions:

RQ1: What strategies do employees use for managing emotional expression in response to emotive e-mails?

RQ2: What is the origin of the strategies for managing emotional expression in e-mails?

Literature Review

In this section, we consider first the role of emotion in communication, focusing particularly on theoretical perspectives and research findings that may be useful in explaining how individuals respond to emotive emails. Then, we consider specifically the research on communication via e-mail.

Emotion and Communication

Emotion is a fundamental part of communication. We both express and interpret emotion in most forms of communication (Planalp, 1999), sometimes explicitly and often implicitly. Because emotional expression and interpretation are often implicit, complex, and subtle, and

because they are essential to competent communication, they have recently come to be

recognized as valuable skills in the workplace and in social situations more generally. The

concept of emotional intelligence has popularized the idea that the skillful expression and

interpretation of emotion is a critical social and workplace competency (Dougherty & Krone,

2002; Goleman, 1999a).

Three sets of perspectives on the interplay of communication and emotion are particularly

relevant to our purposes: (a) the related notions of facework and threat, (b) multiple goals and

tensions addressed in communication, and (c) communication competence.

Facework and threat. Essential to successful communication is the need for politeness

within an exchange (Brown & Levinson, 1987), in particular the desire to maintain 'face'

(Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson proposed that politeness is dependent on displaying

sensitivity to the face needs of others when communicating. Face, according to Goffman, refers

to a person's desired public image. The two dimensions include positive face, or the need for

approval, acceptance, inclusion and affection, and negative face, which refers to the ability to

make autonomous decisions without restriction. When communicating with each other,

interactants mutually negotiate and grant each other a public face (Goffman, 1967).

Behaviors that compromise the face needs of either participant in the exchange are

referred to as face-threatening acts, or FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A threat to positive face

could be an insult or a criticism, and a threat to negative face could be the request for assistance

that incorporates a constraint on the autonomy of the person asked to help.

Gibb's (1961) conceptualization of defensive communication is not typically cited in the

facework literature, yet it covers common ground. Gibb defined defensive communication as

behavior that is aroused in response to an actual or perceived threat. According to Gibb, people

experience a feeling of threat, they spend considerable energy defending themselves. They

engage in defensive thinking, including focusing on how others will perceive them, how they could be seen more favorably, how they could exert control or escape consequences, and how a perceived threat could be avoided or minimized. Defensive acts encourage defensive listening in the recipients, whereby a cycle of defensive communication evolves, as originator and recipient engage in defending themselves.

Thus, both conceptual frameworks see negatively emotive messages in terms of threat, and suggest that receivers of such messages will be put on the defensive. Many will get caught in a spiral of defensiveness, such that negatively emotive messages prompt the use of other negatively emotive messages, leading to what Gibb (1961) called a defensive climate.

Multiple goals and tensions. While sometimes conveying emotion is the primary goal of a message, often emotion is not the substantive focus but a subsidiary part of the message. As many communication scholars have suggested, messages are almost always multifunctional (Clark & Delia, 1979), meaning they either are intended to achieve, or may be perceived as having implications for (or both), multiple communication goals. Clark and Delia further suggested that communicators have three broad classes of functional objectives whenever they interact: instrumental, relational, and identity goals. The goal of preserving face, as described in the previous section, is an example of an identity goal.

These three kinds of goals are often seen as competing, or in tension (O'Keefe & Delia, 1982). Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) explicitly discussed that face goals are typically in tension with the goal of efficiency in communication; that is, we will often not say things in the most efficient or direct way because of the need to preserve face.

Thus, in responding to emotive messages, communicators would need to weigh multiple goals that are in tension with each other. Beyond the two conceptual frameworks discussed, communicators often respond to other tensions as well. For example, upon receiving an emotive

e-mail, one might wish to respond promptly and, simultaneously, wish to carefully consider the situation and relevant options—two wishes that are in tension. Similarly, one could simultaneously wish to engage the other person (e.g., to clarify or resolve the issue) and to distance oneself, at least temporarily, in order to avoid further conflict. Or, in response to an offensive message, one might wish simultaneously to fight back and to make peace.

These multiple goals and tensions in communicating make the task of communication much more complex. Attempting to address multiple goals in a single message is complex and challenging, especially if, for example, we feel the need to perform an unpleasant communicative act (e.g., correct a mistake or reprimand) to someone we like or value. Thus, substantial research has shown that the ability to address multiple goals successfully is a developmental accomplishment—that is, one that we learn as our communication competence develops (e.g., Applegate, 1990). Furthermore, the "emotive" part of the message is likely to be the part that addresses the subsidiary goals, such as the identity and relational goals, rather than the primary or instrumental goal.

Simultaneously, the complexity of multifunctional communication makes the task of *discerning* the intended meaning of a message more challenging. Thus, emotion is often "read into" a message rather than being an explicit part of the message, and it is possible to interpret a single message in multiple ways. Whether a message is emotive and what emotion it conveys or prompts is therefore not an objective matter, but rather one that is contextually and relationally based.

In this section and the previous one, we drew on conceptual frameworks that identify key, relevant elements of communication and thus describe the ways that emotion may play out in communication. It is no surprise that communicative interactions are often emotional and challenging. Communicators have competing goals that they must attempt to address in

constructing messages, they do so through verbal and nonverbal means, and they attempt to discern the meanings—including emotions—of messages received. In the next section, we turn our attention to the question of how to be more or less successful, or competent, in these communicative tasks.

Communication competence. In considering how individuals in organizations respond to emotive emails, it is necessary to consider the question of communication competence. Faced with an emotive e-mail from a work colleague, one must consider how to respond strategically to achieve particular outcomes. In essence, the question is one of competence. How does one communicate competently in such a situation? Competence has been studied from a variety of different perspectives, with little agreement among scholars as to how to conceptualize competence. Competence is variously conceptualized as, among other things, an attribution, a set of behaviors, and a set of skills and knowledge.

A particularly useful model was developed by Jablin and colleagues (Jablin, Cude, House, Lee, & Roth, 1994; Jablin & Sias, 2001), which conceptualizes communication competence in organizations at multiple levels of analysis. This model contends that not only individuals, but also groups and organizations, can be characterized as more or less communicatively competent. Furthermore, these multiple levels of competence are mutually influencing. So, shared knowledge of a context, such as the forms of communication that are considered appropriate for that context, constitutes an important component of the group's or organization's communication competence, while the values and assumptions embedded in this knowledge influence judgments of individuals' competence. In essence, this describes a process of structuration (Giddens, 1979) in which structures, such as rules and norms about appropriate forms of communication, emerge and subsequently guide choices and interpretations made by members of a culture.

Among the important structures that are embedded in organizational cultures are emotion display rules, or organizational guidelines specifying which emotions are appropriate in particular contexts and how they should be displayed. While display rules have been primarily conceptualized as job requirements for those performing emotional labor (Hochschild, 1985), they have more recently been discussed as informal expectations or organizational norms (e.g., Diefendorff, Richard, & Croyle, 2006; Kramer & Hess, 2002).

Jablin and Sias (2001) considered communication competence as both an attribution—that is, a judgment about someone or some group as effective—and a set of resources, including knowledge (about communication that is appropriate for a context), skill (in executing communicative performances), and motivation to communicate. It is important to consider both these senses of "competent," since they do not necessarily converge. One may have substantial communicative resources to bring to bear on a situation, yet be perceived—for example, because of others' predispositions—as incompetent. The reverse also occurs, in which someone with few resources is judged competent. Of course, having substantial resources, while no guarantee, increases the likelihood that others will attribute competence to a communicator.

Within the Jablin model, knowledge of emotional display rules would constitute an important resource that contributes to an individual's communication competence. Note that such competence is closely linked to the popular concept of emotional intelligence (Dougherty & Krone, 2002; Goleman, 1999b). Dougherty and Krone argued that the understanding and use of appropriate emotional display rules within social settings is a critical element of emotional intelligence.

Returning to the conceptual frameworks reviewed in previous sections is also relevant here, since these frameworks point to additional resources that can enable competent communication. The theories of facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and defensive climates

(Gibb, 1961) conceptualized negatively emotive messages in terms of threat, and suggested that receivers of such messages may be put on the defensive. Many will get caught in a spiral of defensiveness by responding in kind, thus heightening defensiveness. But implicit in both frameworks is that through competent communicative responses, one may influence subsequent interaction—and avoid the cycle of defensiveness—by responding with competent, non-defensive messages. This possibility is suggested by Lindskold, Betz and Walters's research (1986) and research by Bottom and colleagues (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002), both of which found experimental evidence to indicate that a hostile or defensive pattern of communication could be altered with appropriate conciliatory acts, including explanations, apologies, and substantive amends.

Furthermore, Gibb identified a number of communicative acts that contribute to a supportive (as opposed to defensive) climate; these may be seen in his framework to constitute generally more competent communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) similarly indicated a set of strategic responses to threat. When one's goal is to improve the situation rather than add to the negativity, their theory suggests that one will employ increasingly polite strategies as the magnitude of one's own FTA increases. That is, if the response one wishes to make to a negatively emotive act is itself potentially face threatening, a competent communicator will use a more polite strategy. The knowledge of the strategic options identified in Gibb's and Brown and Levinson's theories, along with contextual understanding of when and how to use them, are important resources to the communicator faced with an emotive e-mail message. We now briefly take up the question of the particular characteristics of e-mail that are relevant to the communicative task of responding to emotive messages.

Communication via E-mail

Few studies have directly addressed emotional aspects of e-mail communication. Some exceptions (Curran & Casey, 2006; Duthler, 2006; Hamel, 2005; Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005) are incorporated into the review below. Other than Hamel's doctoral dissertation, no studies that we have found have addressed communicative responses to emotive emails. However, there is ample research on the technical qualities of e-mail as a medium and some research on communication practices of e-mail users. This research is reviewed below.

Inherent qualities of e-mail as a medium. The characteristics of e-mail as a medium of communication have been the focus of substantial scholarly attention. Several qualities of e-mail are particularly relevant to the current research. First, e-mail is asynchronous, and as such, senders of emotive messages have the option of sending the message whether or not the intended receiver is immediately available; receivers, on the other hand, have the option of not responding immediately (or indeed, at all), and thus, have more time for reflection and planning than is typical in FTF interaction (Duthler, 2006; Walther, 1996). As an asynchronous medium, e-mail also enables people to convey messages concurrently without the need for turn taking, allowing the communication to be less constrained by turn-taking rules, but also allowing for the possibility of overlapping messages, for example, a response being sent before a clarifying message can arrive (Baron, 1998; Garton & Wellman, 1995).

Second, e-mail is not constrained by proximity. Thus people can communicate to someone in the next office or on the other side of the world with almost equal ease. The lack of proximity also means lack of physical presence, which may be important in both sending and receiving emotive messages. A number of authors have argued that the lack of physical presence of the other party reduces self-awareness and awareness of the other, resulting in a reduced

salience of social rules—and thus a tendency to violate accepted social norms, communicate more aggressively, and/or escalate conflict (e.g., Friedman & Currall, 2003).

Third, and most importantly, e-mail is a lean (Daft & Lengel, 1984) or low bandwidth (Walther & Parks, 2002) medium, meaning, among other things, that it is limited in the range of cues that can be conveyed during communication. More specifically, e-mail is primarily textual, as opposed to visual, medium, and as such is very limited in its ability to convey emotion cues (Curran & Casey, 2006). As a result, senders of messages often struggle to convey the appropriate tone and receivers often are challenged to interpret the intended meaning.

Two competing models are reflected in the literature concerning the ability of low bandwidth media to manage social relations (Duthler, 2006). First is the "cues filtered out" or reduced social cues model (Culnan & Markus, 1987). This model suggests that lower bandwidth media, because they restrict communication cues more than FTF communication, are less suited for managing social relations tasks than FTF media. As Walther and Parks (2002) explained, this model assumes that the functions served by nonverbal cues in interaction go unmet in computer-mediated interaction because the nonverbal cues are absent. This deficiency directly affects the degree of social presence, or the feeling that the other person is involved in the communication exchange. Finally, as social presence decreases, the conversational partner becomes deindividuated, which in turn "results in an increased likelihood of antisocial behavior, lack of adherence to convention, and disinhibited behavior" (Duthler, 2006, p. 503). Thus, the cues filtered out model suggests that e-mail, as a low bandwidth medium, is more likely than FTF to generate emotive messages, and presents more challenges to the recipient as a medium through which to resolve the problem presented.

The second model is the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996). This model suggests that CMC such as e-mail is superior to FTF communication in managing social relations tasks

because of its lower bandwidth and its asynchronous quality. Lower bandwidth means that common identity cues such as gender or physical features are not immediately apparent. Thus, e-mail users can manipulate these cues strategically to optimize self-presentation. This is obviously most relevant in anonymous CMC such as chatrooms, since in e-mail exchanges within organisations, communicators are not likely to anonymous. However, it is still true that identity cues may not be as salient in e-mail situations compared to FTF. Additionally, because of the asynchronous quality of e-mail, individuals are better able to reflect, compose, and edit message content, and time self-disclosure and message exchange strategically. While the hyperpersonal model seems on the surface counterintuitive, the limited empirical support available suggests that its claims have merit, at least in certain circumstances (Duthler, 2006).

The two models differ in their claims and both have garnered empirical support, yet they both agree that certain features of e-mail—particularly, its low bandwidth and asynchronous quality—are critical differences from FTF communication that have implications for addressing relational tasks such as responding to emotive messages. What they differ on is whether, on the whole, the unique combination of features inherent in e-mail constitutes an advantage or disadvantage relative to FTF communication for relational tasks. It seems to us that this question is less important than how the unique combination of features matches to a particular situated task. This is essentially the position taken by Friedman and Currall (2003) who argue that while e-mail may be effectively hyperpersonal in building relationships or offering support, it has substantial disadvantages compared to FTF communication for de-escalating conflict—that is, responding to negatively emotive messages.

E-mail communication in practice. In practice, messages sent via e-mail tend to be shorter, more concise, and less formal than other forms of written communication. The lowered formality reduces the need for phatic communication such as the exchange of pleasantries that

occurs in traditional letter writing and phone calls (Baron, 1998). E-mails tend to be phrased in a more conversational style than letter writing – that is, as if speaking, rather than writing. There is generally less editing and emphasis on grammar and punctuation (Baron, 1998; Sherwood, 2001). One explanation for this casualness is the fact that, compared with memos and letters, feedback is much faster with e-mail, and clarification can be obtained rapidly if required (Sherwood, 2001). On the other hand, the quick and casual exchange characteristic of e-mail-based communication lends itself to misunderstandings (Curran & Casey, 2006; Fallows, 2002) and therefore emotive responses.

Furthermore, people tend to overestimate the likelihood that recipients will understand their intended meaning, and overestimate their own ability to interpret others' meanings (Kruger et al., 2005). Kruger and colleagues' experimental studies found that people attempting to convey sarcasm, humor, and other emotions consistently overestimated their ability to convey their meanings successfully, and that their overconfidence in conveying an interpreting emotion was greater with e-mail than with voicemail.

Sources of Guidance for Email Communication

To our knowledge, no studies have specifically addressed the question of where and how e-mail users acquire knowledge of appropriate e-mail use. Like most communication practices, competence in e-mail communication is likely to be learned through informal socialization, including personal experience trial and error. However, given the prevalence of e-mail use in organizations, and the potential problematic consequences for those organizations, one likely source of guidance would seem to be company policy. However, few organizations have adopted policies to guide e-mail use (Hacker et al., 1998)

Hacker et al. (1998)'s study of e-mail policies at a university library found that the organization's policies on e-mail use were seen in both positive and negative ways by employees;

in general higher level employees and frequent e-mail users evaluated e-mail policies more negatively than lower level employees and less frequent users. Overall, employees preferred suggestive guidelines rather than restrictive policies. They also found that have identified that policies that are "top-down", and do not include input from employees who use the e-mail, may inhibit e-mail productivity.

In sum, while there has been substantial research on emotion in organizations, the technical qualities of e-mail, and related matters, only Hamel (2005) has investigated responses to emotive emails, and her study focused on broad categories of responses, such as intent to leave and "voice" (i.e., speaking up) rather on the specific communicative responses to such emails. Thus, we set out to do an exploratory study of how communicators respond to negatively emotive emails and what sources of guidance they drew on.

Method

To address the study's goal of investigating emotional communication in the use of e-mail within organizations, an interpretive approach (Cheney, 2000) was adopted. In this section, the methods employed to answer the research questions are discussed. Information describing and explaining the participants, organizational contexts, research procedures, and ethical issues are provided, followed by a description of the method of data analysis.

Participants

Participants from a variety of organizations were approached via e-mail using a snowball sampling method (Polit & Beck, 2003). Specifically, we started by asking friends and acquaintances and asked them to recommend other possible participants. Eighteen participants provided us with usable data.

The criteria for participation were that participants used e-mail daily in their working role, had worked with their current employer at least one year and the employer must be New Zealand-

based.[1] The length of time participants had used e-mail as a means of communication ranged from 3.5 years to 15 years. The length of time e-mail had been used as a means of communication in the participants' current place of employment ranged from 6 months to 13 years. There were 12 female and 6 male participants. Participants were employed in a range of organizations, including manufacturing and service industries, educational, health, and private organizations.

Participants were first provided with an information sheet describing the study, procedures, and their rights and a consent form. Once the consent form was completed the participant was emailed the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

An open-ended survey questionnaire sent and returned via e-mail was used to collect data from participants. This method of data collection was chosen since the participants were familiar with the use of e-mail and because this would enable them to copy parts of relevant e-mails into their answers. Given that e-mail was the focus of the research, we also suspected that using e-mail while writing about it would prompt heightened reflection on e-mail practices. We acknowledge that e-mail surveys can have limitations due to factors such as restricted visual stimulation and interactional capabilities. However, for the purpose of this study the convenience of access to the participants, the speed of dissemination, and the minimized disruption for the participants were considered to outweigh these disadvantages.

Survey questions were emailed to the participants after receiving their consent. The overall design of the questions was to focus the participants' attention and awareness on the emotion in particular e-mails they had received. E-mails on which they focused included communication with both colleagues and managers. The questions aimed to logically progress the participant through the steps of identifying the emotion, how the emotion was experienced, how they responded to the emotive e-mail, and what informed their response.

Questions were structured as follows. The first four questions focused on the participants' e-mail background and experience. Each participant was then asked to locate an e-mail that they had received that they considered dealt with an emotional or potentially emotional issue. It is worth noting here that 75% of the examples provided were negatively emotive and 25% positive. However, while we report some examples of positive emails, our focus for the purpose of this paper is on negatively emotive emails. Participants were then asked to cut and paste relevant parts of the e-mail into their response, while respecting the sender's privacy. It was anticipated that the inclusion of the background and context of the e-mail conversation would aid the interpretation of the emotion in the e-mail. Open-ended questions were asked to encourage the participants to elaborate on their experience (Patton, 2002). Participants were asked multiple questions regarding their thoughts and feelings upon receiving the e-mail, as well as how they responded and the sources of guidance for their response.

Analysis

Responses to the survey questions were analyzed using Owen's (1984) thematic analysis. This method is used to identify patterns and themes common to the participants within the research data from individual interviews, ensuring individual perspectives were preserved. Owen specified the criteria for establishing the presence of themes as recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Participant responses to the questionnaire that provided potential answers to the research questions were transcribed and listed on a single page. A theme was considered to be present if it emerged meeting this criteria in three or more interviews. Each theme was then described and refined to offer the best explanation of the theme and answer to the research questions.

Results

This section reports the findings of thematic analysis of the participant responses to the e-mail questionnaire. Results are drawn from the data as interpreted by the researchers and are

presented in tables that provide summaries of the themes, with definitions and examples of appropriate sections of participant responses. These tables are located at the beginning of the discussion of each research question.

Strategies for Responding to Emotive E-mails

Participants articulated a number of strategic responses to the emotive emails received. A caveat is in order here: We do not use the term *strategic* to imply that the responses were always carefully planned. In fact, many of them clearly were not. However, participants articulated the communicative and non-communicative means by which they responded to the emotive emails received. We have identified these strategies in terms of two major themes and six minor themes or subthemes. While our sample size is too small to justify drawing conclusions about frequency of use of each strategy or subtheme, we refer to numbers of responses in a number of cases below to give an indication of the relative salience of the strategies described.

The two major themes emerged in response to this question were *reactive response* and *considered response*. These two themes can be seen to reflect a major underlying tension, or alternatively, competing goals that participants faced. That is, upon receiving an emotive e-mail, participants had to choose whether to respond or react relatively immediately to address the issue, or alternatively, to reflect on the situation and how to address it.

Within each of these two major themes were two or more subthemes. In part, the subthemes reflected a second major tension—what we might call an *engage-distance* tension. Essentially, this is the decision as to whether to confront or engage the e-mail sender directly or, alternatively, to avoid or delay contact in order to distance oneself from the negative message or sender. The themes may thus be seen to each be located on a 2x2 matrix, as shown in Figure 1.
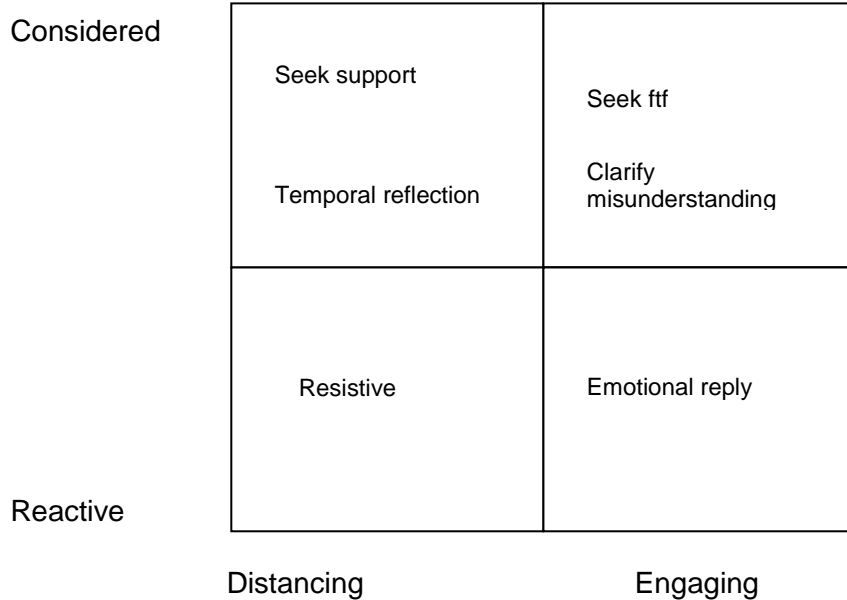
Considered		
Seek support		Seek ftf
		Clarify misunderstanding
Temporal reflection		
Resistive		Emotional reply
Reactive		
	Distancing	Engaging

Figure 1: Dimensions underlying responses to emotive emails.

The individual themes and sub-themes along with their definitions and relevant quotes from participant responses are included in Table 1. The following sections briefly explicate the strategies.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes for Responses to Emotive E-mails

Theme	Subtheme	Definition	Examples
Reactive response	Resistive response (Distance)	Ignoring or resisting the requested action or expected work outcomes	➢ Deleted the e-mail immediately and gave the person the requested information late. ➢ Not respond at all. ➢ I felt unwilling to have conversations with this colleague.
	Emotional reply (Engage)	Replying in kind, or demonstrating emotional impact to sender	➢ Reply in a provocative, emotive fashion. ➢ Responded to the e-mail allowing the sender to see how angry I was. ➢ The e-mail was so reasonable and respectful that I felt compelled to respond similarly.
Considered response	Seeking support (Distance)	Discussing with appropriate people	➢ Talk over an appropriate response with a colleague. ➢ Had conversations with my manager regarding strategies for dealing with the sender. ➢ Discussions with another person who has also experienced this behavior.
	Temporal reflection (Distance)	Delaying the response to the e-mail	➢ Put the e-mail aside and respond later after I'd got some distance from my first reaction. ➢ Do not send e-mails when feeling emotional. Wait till in a better frame of

		mind.
		➢ Wrote a response straight away, didn't send and didn't keep.
Seeking FTF encounter (Engage)	Addressing the e-mail content in person	➢ Go and speak with him personally about it.
		➢ Arranged a time to discuss the issue face-to-face.
		➢ I noted the issues and looked for the opportunity to address them face-to-face.
Clarify misunder-standing (Engage)	Demonstrating understanding of sender's position and influencing their emotional experience	➢ I wanted to make clear that I had reasons for taking that action, but without making him wrong
		➢ I replied by e-mail to clarify where I fitted into the situation.
		➢ I decided to phone to clarify a lot of misunderstandings on their part.

Reactive Response

This theme captured responses in which the participants chose to act on their emotional experience immediately, seemingly with little consideration for the other's perspective and little thought regarding the consequences. This theme included two subthemes. Participants either responded in a manner that resisted the message in the e-mail (called resistive response or action), or by emailing a reply to the sender demonstrating the emotional impact of the original e-mail (called emotional reply).

Subtheme 1: Resistive response. This subtheme may be seen to reflect the *distancing* end of the engage-distance tension. In essence, participants using this strategy described their response as one of resistance or lack of compliance to the request in the e-mail. One way several participants showed resistance was by ignoring or deleting the e-mail messages. One who received an e-mail written in all capital letters ("I WANT YOUR TIMESHEETS NOW!") responded, "My reaction was immediate – oh they are on another power trip, good oh and I deleted the e-mail immediately". This participant also chose to respond by delaying provision of the information to the person as requested.

Subtheme 2: Emotional reply. In this subtheme, participants engaged the sender by demonstrating the emotional impact of the e-mail to the sender or by replying in kind. That is,

they sent an e-mail response to the sender that depicted their own emotional experience on receiving the original e-mail. This was the least used strategy in our sample, with only one participant describing it as used in response to a negatively emotive e-mail, and two in response to positively emotive emails. Interestingly, two other participants explained that they considered emotional reply as a strategy but chose not to use it.

Participants who used or considered this strategy in response to negatively emotive emails each explained that they had strong emotional reactions to the e-mail received. The one participant who actually used this strategy in response to a negatively emotive message quoted the e-mail received: "It has come to my attention that the [reports] are still outstanding. This situation is a breach of [organizational policy]. Could you please give finalising these [reports] your highest priority." This participant explained: "I felt angry; as it appeared the only person at fault was me....I responded to the e-mail allowing the sender to see how angry I was".

Considered response

The second major theme includes a set of strategies in which participants engaged in a level of reflection before responding to the sender of the e-mail. This theme had four subthemes that all involved the participants considering their response to the original e-mail. Not surprisingly, there was some overlap within the subthemes. For example, some of the participants chose to seek support before responding to the e-mail, and then chose other forms of a considered response. Also, the participants who engaged in temporal reflection also sought support from a manager or colleague.

Subtheme 1: Seeking support. For this subtheme participants avoided or delayed engaging the sender by having discussions with appropriate people to assist them in deciding how best to respond to the e-mail. Participants described seeking support from a manager, colleague or partner about how to manage the emotional content of the e-mail. An example of a statement from a participant who gained support from a manager was:

My initial, emotively fuelled, reaction was to either ignore the e-mail or be equally rude in return. Upon reflection, I decided that this would have long-term negative effects on our professional relationship. I have had conversations with my manager regarding strategies for dealing with the sender when he is in a bad mood and the suggestions raised during said conversations proved handy in this case.

All of these participants mentioned seeking support for how to respond to the e-mail, rather than seeking support to assist them deal with the feelings evoked by the e-mail. Although the development of a strategy that provided a way forward may also have assisted with the feelings, this was not mentioned as a primary motivator for seeking support.

Subtheme 2: Temporal reflection. In this subtheme, participants chose to distance themselves from the sender in order to take time to reflect on how to move forward. For example, one participant wrote: "I ignored it for 24 hours until I could construct an appropriate response. I personally do not send e-mails when I am emotional. I wait until I am in a better frame of mind". Another stated: "Actually I wrote an initial response straight away, which I thought better of sending & didn't keep". Temporal reflection was in each case combined with other strategies, suggesting that it was a first step rather than a complete strategic response. However, we include it as a separate strategy because it is easy to imagine temporal reflection in some cases leading to inaction. That is, like Hamlet, some people will no doubt reflect, brood, and grumble on the emotive email, but not actively respond.

Subtheme 3: Seeking FTF encounter. Six participants suggested that they engaged the e-mail senders by seeking FTF encounters with when emotions were raised. Several participants described experiencing anger as a response to e-mails and sought resolution via a FTF conversation, often having first engaged in temporal reflection. One participant described feeling hurt by the content of an e-mail, and explained: "I felt it was best to discuss the issue face to face and the best way of arranging that was to reply by e-mail rather than by phone." This participant

further explained that a FTF encounter would allow them to clarify their concerns about the tone of the e-mail: "E-mails are often terse, and it's easy for terseness to shade over into rudeness. Most people find it much harder to be rude when face-to-face with someone."

Subtheme 4: Clarifying misunderstanding. This theme reflected a need to engage the sender by either seeking or providing additional information about the context and content of the e-mail. All of the respondents whose responses were included in this theme experienced the emotion in the e-mails as negative. One participant, although feeling angry about an e-mail referencing a project deadline, emailed to clarify: "I presented a factual response outlining the potential barrier in meeting the deadline".

Origin of Guidance for Strategic Responses

Whereas Research Question 1 focused on what the strategies for responding to emotive e-mails, this question examined the origins of these strategies. Four themes emerged as a result of the analysis of this research question. These themes, along with their definitions and short sections of the relevant part of participant statements are included in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes for Origins of Guidance for Strategic Responses

Theme	Definition	Participant examples
Personal values and intuition	Responses guided by felt emotion or personal values	➢ I listened to my feelings ➢ I had empathy for the sender ➢ Plain common sense. I don't like hiding behind an e-mail.
Implicit organizational expectations for e-mail communication	Conforming to assumed organizational standards of e-mail etiquette	➢ The organization has high expectations for client satisfaction and professional behavior which sets up the "tone of voice" in e-mails. ➢ One of our core corporate values is ethical behavior. There aren't any specific guidelines as to constructing e-mail messages, however ethical behavior [is] implied. ➢ Organization's ethos and hallmarks statement.
Explicit organizational expectations for e-mail communication	Conforming to clear organizational standards of e-mail etiquette	➢ We have an internet and e-mail policy that we are required to read and sign annually, which specifically discusses unnecessary copying of other staff on e-mails. ➢ E-mail protocols are in place but do not cover style. ➢ Broad guidelines have been given by the organization by e-mail, eg: "don't use capital letters as it makes the reader feel that you are shouting".
Relationship with the sender	Response guided by prior knowledge of the person	➢ Over time getting used to the person's way of being helps. ➢ How I respond depends on how well I know the person and how much I respect them. If I know a person well I can e-mail saying "we seem to be misunderstanding each other". ➢ Experience with the individual.

Personal values and intuition

This was the dominant theme to emerge from the analysis of the responses to this research question, with half of the participants describing that the origin of their strategies for managing e-mail emotion was from the felt emotion and personal values of the participants, rather than from any organizational guidelines or expectations. Three participants used the term "common sense" to explain the source of their response. Several other participants made statements that indicated that their feelings or emotional state informed their choice of response. Another participant suggested their personal values guided their response management of e-mail emotion: "My philosophy is to build relationships in the workplace so [I] use courtesy, manners and consideration to enhance relationships".

Implicit expectations for e-mail communication

Eight participants indicated that, rather than responding to personal values, their responses were informed by organizational values. However, these were not explicitly stated rules or policies, but norms implied by the general ethos of the organization. As one participant stated: "There are no overt guidelines other than the general expectation that all behavior will reflect company values of respect, tolerance, mutual care and collaboration". Participants such as this one assumed organizational expectations for certain standards of e-mail etiquette based on their perception of their organizations' philosophy.

Explicit expectations for e-mail communication

Five of the participants indicated that their responses were guided by explicit organizational guidelines. These guidelines ranged from apparently specific and comprehensive, such as, *"*We have very good policies and best practice guidelines which we refer to all the time,*"* to more general e-mail policies, such as, "Broad guidelines have been given by the organization by e-mail. e.g. don't use capital letters as it makes the reader feel that you are shouting.*"*

Relationship with the sender

Four participants explained that their choice of response was based on their prior knowledge of the sender. That is, the source of their strategies was a set of understandings based on a history of interacting with the individual. For example, one participant explained that his response was guided by, *"Knowing the person and how they communicate with people".*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of responding to emotive emails. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the responses to this question demonstrate divergent ways of managing emotions in e-mails and multiple sources of knowledge regarding how to respond. In this section, we discuss the findings, their implications, and future directions for research.

There was a relatively balanced use of the six subthemes, or strategies, among the participants. Approximately one third of the respondents responded *reactively* by either resisting desired work outcomes or by responding in a way that was designed to convey emotion to the original e-mail writer. The remainder used a *considered* response, reflecting on the message or consulting others and clarifying information or requesting a FTF encounter.

While there are multiple goals to pursue in any interaction and often multiple tensions to be addressed, the primary tensions we discovered in examining participants' responses to emotive emails were reactive-considered and distance-engage. The first is the tension between, on the one hand, responding quickly or impulsively, and on the other, taking the time to consider options and finding a way to de-escalate the conflict. The second is a tension between engaging the sender in interaction versus avoiding or delaying engagement. No doubt there are other important tensions, for example, those implied in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory—that is, the tension between being efficient versus being polite in communication. However, the two tensions that we identified stood out as characterizing the six strategic responses to emotive

emails. This is an original and important contribution to the literature that needs to be further researched.

Individuals who are faced with an emotive e-mail message in the workplace find themselves in a challenging situation, one that can have important consequences for relationships, reputations, and careers. Thus, the individual's communicative competence is called upon to address the situation effectively. Considering participants' messages in terms of competence is therefore essential. According to Jablin and Sias's (2001) model, communication competence may be seen as an attribution or a set of resources. In this study, we focused on the resources available, in particular the sources of knowledge for developing responses. Among the resources that participants identified were knowledge about (a) emotion display rules in the organization, (b) the sender's tendencies, and (c) the strengths and weaknesses of particular media of communication, such as e-mail and FTF.

In response to our second research question, our participants identified multiple sources of knowledge on which they drew to develop their strategic responses. These included personal values, organizational policy, and knowledge of the sender. The knowledge gained from each source is likely to be a useful resource in constructing an effective response to an emotive e-mail. In our study, individuals tended to identify the primary source of guidance rather than all sources. We suggest that this may be due to the limitations of the data collection method we employed. That is, even though respondents were asked "What were your sources *[plural]* of guidance for choosing how to respond?" participants may have minimized effort and simply identified the primary source of guidance. Our view is that the most competent responses are likely to be guided by multiple sources. That is, to calibrate the response most likely to be effective, an individual should consider *all* of the sources identified by personal values, company policy or guidelines, and knowledge of the other and triangulate the guidance offered by these various sources. Future research should explore this proposition.

Other resources that participants drew on to develop competent responses included their own stock of stored knowledge and that of colleagues. For example, participants drew on beliefs they had acquired through experience regarding media strengths; some who chose to seek a FTF encounter as a way of responding justified their decision in terms of the perceived advantages of FTF communication compared to e-mail, as indicated by the participant who said, "E-mails are often terse, and it's easy for terseness to shade over into rudeness. Most people find it much harder to be rude when face-to-face with someone." Those who described using a strategy of temporal reflection were taking the opportunity to consider their stock of knowledge in relation to the difficult situation faced.

Others drew on colleagues' knowledge, personal experience/reflection, and ideas from others in developing strategic response. Guidance on how to respond emotionally within a particular organization often originates through discussion with colleagues in the organization (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). These conversations may help the individual gain some perspective and generate learning for both the organization. More concretely, the individual gets help developing strategies that reflect the particular emotional display rules that emerge from a shared understanding of the context. The value of such an approach is reflected in the very thoughtful approach indicated by this participant: *"I talked it over with a colleague and decided on the approach that I took. I wanted to make it clear that I had reasons for taking that action but without making him wrong – a leadership approach"*.

As indicated in the previous example—particularly the phrase "without making him wrong"—politeness theory and defensive climates are also helpful in interpreting these findings. Negatively emotive emails are FTAs. Responses to FTAs are themselves very likely to be FTAs. Thus, there is a real danger of creating a spiral of defensiveness, with both communicators becoming threatened and defensive in their interactions (Flint, 2005; Gibb, 1961). This was the concern of one of the participants who, while seeing an emotive reply as an option, decided the

longer term negative effects would be too costly. In their words: *"I decided that [responding emotively] would have long-term negative effects on our professional relationship"*. Yet, as implied by this participant's response, there is the potential that through competent communicative responses, one may influence subsequent interaction—and avoid the cycle of defensiveness—by responding with competent, non-defensive messages, consistent with findings by Lindskold et al. (1986) and Bottom et al. (2002). The considered responses identified by our participants--temporal reflection, consultation with others, clarifying information, and seeking FTF encounters—especially informed by the sources of guidance participants identified, have the potential to change the defensive climate created by a negatively emotive e-mail into a more supportive and constructive one.

Future research on this topic should explore each quadrant in our model more fully, identifying the frequency of response type, the sources of each response type, conditions under which each are likely to be used. We should examine more specifically the emotion display rules understood for emails in particular contexts, for example, to consider how they compare to the generic emotion display rules in organizations as identified by Kramer and Hess (2002). We should also examine the substantive emotion in negatively emotive messages, for example, exploring Fisher and Shapiro's (2005) contention that there are five core concerns underlying emotive exchanges.

References

Applegate, J. L. (1990). Constructs and communication: A pragmatic integration. *Advances in personal construct psychology, 1*, 203-230.

Baron, N. S. (1998). Letters by phone or speech by other means: The linguistics of email. *Language and Communication, 18*, 133-170.

Bottom, W. P., Gibson, K., Daniels, S. E., & Murnighan, J. K. (2002). When talk Is not cheap: Substantive penance and expressions of intent in rebuilding cooperation. *Organization Science, 13*(5), 497–513.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. New York: Cambridge.

Cheney, G. (2000). Interpreting interpretive research: Toward perspectivism without realism. In S. R. Corman & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Perspectives on organizational communication: Finding common ground* (pp. 17-45). New York: Guilford.

Clark, R. A., & Delia, J. G. (1979). Topoi and rhetorical competence. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 65*, 187-206.

Culnan, M., & Markus, M. (1987). Information technologies. In F. Jablin, L. Putnam, K. Roberts & L. Porter (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 420-443). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Curran, K., & Casey, M. (2006). Expressing emotion in electronic mail. *Kybernetes, 35*(5), 616-631.

Daft, R., & Lengel, R. (1984). Information Richness: A new approach to managerial information processing and organizational design. In L. L. Cummings & B. M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior* (pp. 191-233). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Diefendorff, J. M., Richard, E. M., & Croyle, M. H. (2006). Are emotional display rules formal job requirements? Examination of employee and supervisor perceptions. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 79*, 273-298.

Dougherty, D. S., & Krone, K. J. (2002). Emotional intelligence as organizational communication. *Communication Yearbook, 26*, 202-229.

Duthler, K. W. (2006). The politeness of requests made via email and voicemail: Support for the hyperpersonal model. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*, 500-521.

Fallows, D. (2002). *Email at work: Few feel overwhelmed and most are pleased with the way email helps them do their jobs*. Washington, D. C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Fisher, R., & Shapiro, D. (2005). *Beyond reason: Using emotions as you negotiate*. New York: Viking.

Flint, L. (2005). Communication Climate. Retrieved 22/06/05, 2005, from http://www.bsu.edu/classes/flint/climate.html

Friedman, R. A., & Currall, S. C. (2003). Conflict escalation: Dispute exacerbating elements of e-mail communication. *Human Relations, 56*(11), 1325-1347.

Garton, L., & Wellman, B. (1995). Social impacts of electronic mail in organisations: A review of the research literature. In B. R. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 18, pp. 434-453). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Gibb, J. R. (1961). Defensive communication. *Journal of Communication, 11*(3), 141-148.

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face interaction*. New York: Pantheon.

Goleman, D. (1999a). *Working with emotional intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.

Goleman, D. (1999b). *Working with emotional intelligence.* London: Bloomsbury.

Hacker, K. L., Goss, B., & Townley, C. (1998). Employee attitudes regarding electronic mail policies. *Management Communication Quarterley, 11*(3), 422-452.

Hamel, S. A. (2005). *Receivers' reactions to dissonant use of communication technology in the workplace: Effects on communication strategies and the perceived usefulness of technology.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, Austin.

Hochschild, A. R. (1985). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Jablin, F. M., Cude, R. L., House, A., Lee, J., & Roth, N. L. (1994). Communication competence in organizations: Conceptualization and comparison across multiple levels of analysis. In L. Thayer & G. Barnett (Eds.), *Organization-communication: Emerging perspectives* (Vol. 4, pp. 114-140). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Jablin, F. M., & Sias, P. M. (2001). Communication competence. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kramer, M. W., & Hess, J. A. (2002). Communication rules for the display of emotions in organizational settings. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16*(1), 66-80.

Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J., & Ng, Z.-W. (2005). Egocentrism over e-mail: Can we communicate as well as we think? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*(6), 925-936.

Lindskold, S., Betz, B., & Walters, P. S. (1986). Transforming competitive or cooperative climates. *Journal of Conflict, 30*(1), 99-114.

O'Keefe, B. J., & Delia, J. G. (1982). Impression formation and message production. In M. E. Roloff & C. R. Berger (Eds.), *Social cognition and communication* (pp. 33-72). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 70*, 274-287.

Planalp, S. (1999). *Communicating emotion: Social, moral, and cultural processes*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2003). *Nursing research: Principles and methods.* (7th ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins.

Sherwood, K. D. (2001). A beginners guide to effective email.   Retrieved 1 May, 2004, from http://www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3-43.

Walther, J. B., Loh, T., & Granka, L. (2005). Let me count the ways: The interchange of verbal and nonverbal cues in computer-mediated and face-to-face affinity. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 24*(1), 36-65.

Walther, J. B., & Parks, M. (2002). Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: CMC and relationships. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 529-563). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

---

[1] An exception to this was one of the participants who had only worked for the organization for 6 months, but was included because of their extensive use of e-mail in previous work settings.