Strategies and Bad habits in dealing with email at work

Background and rationale

The explosion of new technology communications – email in particular - in the workplace, within the last ten to twenty years, has literally been phenomenal. It has changed the way that we organise and deal with our work, and altered our approach to communication entirely (Kraut and Attewell, 1997). Developments in email technology have progressed at a far greater pace than psychological science can observe. As such, end-users have been foundering – adopting techniques and strategies that quickly become obsolete as the rapidity of technology change outsmarts individual adjustments to it (McFarlane and Latorella, 2002). In this research, I was interested in better understanding which strategies and actions people use to deal with their email at work. In particular, I wanted to establish why people choose to use the strategies that they do – from a multi-goal perspective.

People execute actions at work for a variety of reasons. Predominantly these are goal focused. For example, Action Theorists (Frese and Zapf, 1994; Schonpflug, 1992) state that action at work is designed to enhance efficiency – people aim to achieve their work goals to optimal levels of effectiveness but at minimum cost to themselves. Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) argue that action is generated by one's current affective state, and affect-regulation theorists (Beal et al., 2011; Trougakos et al., 2008.) provide numerous accounts of actions that have been implemented to retain homeostatic balance of emotions, to improve mood, or to reduce negative affect (Hobfoll, 1998).

Action is arranged in performance episodes (Beal et al., 2005). When focused on achieving specific, functional goals through purposeful episodes of activity, we might say that the action is 'strategic'. Action can also be habitual (Frese et al., 1987). This does not mean that it is not strategic. Habits are actions that were originally designed to be goal-focused, but have become automatic after repeated execution and exposure to similar precursors. However, some habitual behaviour is not purposeful, and therefore not strategic. We might say that such action is 'pathological'. In particular, addictive behaviours and compulsions are actions that have become automated but which no longer assist in achieving functional goals, possibly because the link between goals and action has become distorted, or possibly because the goals have become dysfunctional (e.g. satisfying obsessive, compulsive or anxious needs). The display of actions that are pathological is said to be a result of deficient self-regulation (La Rose et al. 2003).

Studying actions associated with email management is of interest because of the rapidity of change within this domain. Actions that may have been borne out of a desire to respond in a timely way to one's clients in the dial-up era, may no longer be appropriate in today's environment. Nowadays, email is delivered and dealt with continuously throughout the working day and beyond (Mazmanian et al., 2006). To respond immediately on

receipt may no longer be considered efficient, and yet, such actions may persist because they have become automated from previous practice. We also acknowledge the dearth of convincing evidence in the domain of email research, regarding the recommendation of strategies to aid efficacy. Those sourcing time management and interruptions literature will be advised that email should be switched off for periods of the day to prevent a negative impact on other work tasks and cognitive functioning (Jackson et al., 2003). However, this takes a unitary goal perspective. When multiple goals are involved at work (to include well-being, need for control and personality factors), our selection of effective strategies will depend on other considerations.

In this study, two phases of research were executed to examine the strategic actions and 'bad' habits that have become apparent in dealing with email at work. Integrating the research existing in the domains of action and affect regulation, the aim was to establish which actions are strategic - associated with successful goal pursuit, and which actions are likely to be (or become) pathological. In phase one, 28 exploratory interviews were conducted to ask email users about the strategies that they and other people at work use to deal with email. The goal reasons for using – or not using – these strategies were explored. This allowed for the production of a taxonomy of strategies for dealing with email. An acknowledgement that this is not exclusive, comprehensive or static is made. Phase one also allowed for the establishment of a taxonomy of goal reasons for adopting different strategies. It is expected that such reasons will have greater longevity and can be applied to other contexts in a work domain.

In phase two, the most commonly reported strategies from phase one, that were reported to have both positive and negative repercussions for goal reasons, were chosen and entered into a survey. 459 email users completed the survey, via an on-line portal (Qualtrics). Participants were asked to comment on how frequently they used each action and for which goal reason (using five of the goal reasons given in phase one). Participants were also asked to complete a personality questionnaire and a well-being questionnaire. This was to establish whether strategic behaviour and goal pursuit is related to different personality characteristics and affect. To gain a better understanding of such relationships would potentially allow for the production of recommendations to organisations and workers. For example, it could be suggested that certain strategies are universally considered to be beneficial, some strategies are only beneficial to people with certain personality or well-being profiles, and some strategies may be considered to be 'bad habits' and deleterious to all functional goals.

Methodology

Phase One

28 email users, from a range of different industry sectors and demographic backgrounds, were questioned about their email activity at work, using semi-structured interviews. Participants were obtained through opportunity sampling methods – utilising the author's network of contacts. Only those who use email for work purposes on both desktop and mobile communication devices (e.g. smartphone) were interviewed. All participants received a £10 gratuity for their participation. Interviews lasted from 1-2 hours and were held in the interviewees' workplaces

or homes. Interviews utilised a semi-structured partly grounded theory approach (Pidgeon, 2000) and were analysed using content analysis (Bryman 2001). A taxonomy of strategies and goal reason categories were then established, to be used in Phase Two.

Phase Two

459 people were surveyed about their email actions. After removing surveys that contained large amounts of missing data, 406 participants remained. 67% were female, the modal age range was 31-40 (35%) and the modal job level (36%) was project/middle management or equivalent.

Participants were contacted via opportunity sampling methods, varying in approach according to organisation. Participants were informed that they would be entered into a prize draw to win one of several prizes of £100 John Lewis vouchers, as an incentive to take part. A link to the Qualtrics survey site was provided. The survey comprised 22 strategies for dealing with email. The 22 strategies were chosen from the taxonomy identified in phase one, if they a) were in the top three most frequently reported actions in each of the ten themes, AND b) they were reported to have not only positive implications for goal achievement, but at least 3 reported negative implications for goal achievement. Respondents were asked to identify how often they used each strategy (from never to always). If they ever used the strategy they were asked to report which goal category they felt that the action satisfied out of the top 4 reported goal categories (work efficiency; well-being, which was sub-divided into three well-being themes; need for control; need to show concern for others) plus the category 'out of habit/it is automatic'. If participants never use the action, they were asked why not (using the goal categories above, plus two others ('It hasn't occurred to me' and 'I don't know how to'). Data on individual personality characteristics was also collected, using Goldberg's IPIP FFM questionnaire, along with data about general affective well-being (using Daniels' 2000 five-factor measure) – see glossary in Appendix.

Findings (summary)

Phase One

88 strategies were identified across 10 category themes, such as "Strategies for crafting email", "Dealing with email outside of office hours", "Normal methods for receiving email" (see Appendix). 8 different reason codes were given in total, as to why people use (or don't use) the strategies reported. These were classified as:

- To improve work efficiency
- To improve well-being
- To feel in control
- Out of a concern for others
- To be true to one's 'self' or personal style
- For ease/practicality
- Out of habit/automatic
- It is company/industry policy

This list goes beyond the goal reasons suggested by action and affect theories, which primarily focus on the desire to work efficiently, the desire to preserve or promote well-being, and out of habit. These participants report that they act out of a concern for others, for practical reasons and because of company policy, along with as a need to feel in control. Arguably the latter reason may be a facet of work efficiency or well-being reasoning, but it was considered strong enough to warrant a separate category here as a prime reason in its own right. The reporting of 'to be true to one's self or personal style' reiterates the need to consider personality as a reason why people may choose to act in certain ways.

Participants also reported a wide range of negative implications for the strategies, which fit into the same categories as above. For example, a strategy may have negative implications if it prevents one from achieving work goals efficiently, or if it shows a lack of concern for others. Finally, 7 different categories of addictive, potentially 'pathological' behaviours and bad habits (primarily concerned with compulsive behaviours and anxieties – e.g. "I feel compelled to constantly check my email", "I feel anxious about deleting an email") were reported. These were not considered to be 'strategies' as they did not seem to be directed towards achieving functional goals (although this may be why they had originally developed).

Some of the most commonly reported strategies for dealing with email are outlined in Tables One and Two (see appendix), along with the prominent goal reason suggested for their use. The most common reasons given for engaging in any of the 88 email strategies were for: improving work efficiency (30%), improving well-being (19%), to feel in control (15%) and to show concern for others (12%). As mentioned, some strategies were reported as having negative repercussions.

These strategies, bad habits and goal reasons were then investigated further in phase two.

Phase Two
The aims of phase two were to establish:
   (a)   The frequency with which different strategies are used by participants in dealing with the email
   (b)   The frequency with which different goals are associated with each strategy
   (c)   Whether certain personality or well-being characteristics are more or less associated with use of certain strategies and bad habits
   (d)   Whether certain personality or well-being characteristics are more or less associated with use of certain goal reasons
   (e)   Whether some strategies have no functional goal reasons associated with them

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Frequency of strategy use

The strategies most likely to be reported as being used 'always' were: Strategy 7 – using a system of files, folders, etc. to organise email. The strategies most likely to be reported as being used 'often' were: Strategy 1 – having audible and visual alerts witched on and checking email on alert; Strategy 8 – Conduct housekeeping – tidying, filing, deleting, etc.; Strategy 14 – Write short and succinct email; Strategy 20 – Choose to communicate using skype, telephone or face-to-face methods; Strategy 21 – Choose to communicate using email. The strategies most likely to be reported as 'never' being used were: Strategy 2 – Turning off alerts, but checking email periodically; Strategy 5 – completely ignoring an email; Strategy 9 – deleting an email without even looking at it; Strategy 10 – using automated rules, labels, etc.; Strategy 12 – Using read receipts; Strategy 17 – Using a different signature when sending from a smartphone; Strategy 22 – engaging with email when in company. See Table Three in the appendix.

These reports give an indication about how email use has developed, and the strategies that are most commonly used or avoided. Today, it is much more likely that people will have alerts turned on and check email on alert, whereas the strategy for turning off alerts and checking periodically is far less popular. Additionally, people seem keen to keep on top of their email by using files and folder systems, and conducting regular housekeeping. However, they are less likely to use automated rules, ignore or blindly delete email, or use read receipts as part of their management strategies. Finally, 'absent –presence' (checking email when engaged in company or conversation – Orlikowski, 2006) is a strategy that people largely claim they never use (yet was one of the most maligned strategies reported in phase one).

Frequency of goal reasons associated with each strategy

Reasons as to why people choose to use (or not use) certain strategies are outlined in Table Four (see appendix). Work efficiency was the most commonly reported goal reason for strategies 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22. This supports action theory, which states that people choose actions in order to achieve their work goals most efficiently (Frese and Zapf, 1994; Hacker, 1994). However, other commonly stated goal reasons for engaging a strategy include the need to feel in control, and the desire to show concern for others. These are two new categories of goal reason, generated from phase one. The well-being goal reason was split into three components (reflecting a factor analysis of Daniels' well-being measure – based on momentary ratings from over 800 cases). These reasons were reported for each strategy, but they were less common than expected. This suggests that people's choice of strategy relating to email may not be primarily related to a desire to improve or maintain well-being.

In addition (see Table Five in appendix), goal reasons commonly given for avoiding using a strategy (provided by those who claim 'never' to use a strategy) were compiled. A less consistent pattern emerged here. For example, sometimes people avoid a strategy because it prevents them showing concern to others, and sometimes they

avoid it because it detriments work efficiency, or a need to feel in control. Again though, well-being reasons were less commonly reported.

Which strategies and bad habits are associated with FFM personality characteristics?

There were significant correlations between four out of the five IPIP personality factors with several of the strategies and bad habits. Openness to experience was not a predictor of any relationship. Some strategies were especially associated with personality. For example, if one delays auctioning an email after checking, they are more likely to be introverted, independent and low on conscientiousness. Those who delete messages without reading are more likely to be introverted, independent and low on conscientiousness. Those with higher scores on neuroticism are more likely to feel/experience bad habits associated with email – e.g. to experience 'phantom' alerts or become anxious about deleting email.

These findings are all sensible and indicate clearly the role of personality in predicting strategic behaviour and the development of bad habits (see Table Six in appendix).

Which strategies and bad habits are associated with well-being characteristics?

Well-being characteristics showed many significant correlations with strategic behaviour and bad habits. The strategy of delaying auctioning email after checking it was associated with every well-being scale, as were the bad habits of feeling disengaged from reality with excessive email use, and feeling anxious about deleting email. People with high levels of AC and NA were significantly likely to develop *every* bad habit. Table Seven (see appendix) outlines these relationships further. These findings show support to the notion that strategic behaviour and well-being are linked, and that bad habits are more likely to develop in those who experience negative affect at work. This supports the notion that, as affect theorists claim, affect is related to performance at work, and implies that action theory needs to take this factor into account to truly represent why people adopt certain actions at certain times.

Goal reasons as predicted by personality and well-being

Those scoring higher on extraversion were more likely to cite goal reasons for choosing strategy to promote feeling active and motivated ($r=.133^*$, 338), calm, at ease and happy ($r=.111^*$, 338), feeling in control ($r=.129^*$, 338), showing concern to others ($r=.116^*$, 338) and out of habit ($r=.121^*$, 338). Those with higher scores on emotional stability were more likely to cite reasons for choosing a strategy to promote showing concern to others ($r=.116^*$, 338).

Those with higher scores on the A-C well-being scale (more likely to feel anxious) cited the goal reason for wanting to feel less negative (anxious, annoyed, bored, etc.) as a reason for choosing a strategy ($r=.128^*$, 340). This was also true for those with higher levels of negative affect ($r=.111^*$, 338), whilst those with higher levels of

positive affect cited the goal reason of wanting to show concern for others as a key reason for choosing a strategy (r=.111*, 340).

This data is not very convincing however. Correlation coefficients are significant but low, and few personality and well-being terms were significantly related to goal reasons (with the exception of extraversion). A series of multiple regressions were run, entering all five personality characteristics at the same time as predictors of each 'average' goal reason. This process was repeated entering all five well-being measures at the same time as predictors of each 'average' goal reason. NA and PA were not entered because of collinearity (NA and PA are composite scales created from aggregating combinations of the five factors of well-being). As expected (following the correlational analysis) results were again rather weak. Only those regression analyses that demonstrated significant beta weights for one or more predictors are included in Tables Eight and Nine (see appendix). As such, although personality and well-being are significant predictors of people's reasons for using different strategies, this evidence is less substantial. It may be the case that goal reason choice is more likely to be strategy-related, or related to the context/circumstances, rather then being reflective of a person's overall approach to work. This somewhat refutes work by, for example, Lazarus, who reports that people tend to adopt either emotion or problem-focused coping as a function of stable internal characteristics. In addition, Frese and Sabini (1985) found that coping styles are related to stable person characteristics.

Summary

Overall, these two phases of research have garnered some initially exciting results:

1. The production of a taxonomy of strategies for dealing with email
2. The production of a set of goal reasons reported to be applicable to strategic behaviour choices
3. The emergence of some goal reasons help to develop theories of strategic behaviour; people do not simply act in order to satisfy work efficiency or well-being goals, or out of habit. They also act in order to show concern to others, to feel in control, out of practicality (i.e. situational constraints), and because of company policies (i.e. situational constraints).
4. People use a range of different goal reasons for each strategy. All strategies were reported to be used because of the goal reasons given. There was no one strategy that was used simply out of habit, or for no goal reason. This indicates that whilst some strategic behaviour may – on first glance – appear to be inefficient or pathological, it has been enacted because of *some* goal reason. So, a person who engages in email 'ping-pong' may not be satisfying a well-being or work efficiency goal, but they may be satisfying a 'concern for others' goal, and thus it still has purpose.
5. All strategies were also associated with habit. This indicates that each strategy has the propensity to be applied automatically and without thought.
6. Strategies and bad habits are associated with personality and well-being characteristics. This supports the notion that internal factors (beyond task or situational parameters) are associated with our choice of strategy. This finding will advance action theory and support affect theorists.

7. Goal reasons are associated with personality and well-being characteristics, but less convincingly.

Dissemination and Impact

Using more advanced statistics to elucidate further complexity in the data, I intend to write up this project (both phases) alongside a previous piece of work I have conducted, looking at email, multiple goals and personality/well-being factors for a 4* journal. The paper will present a model of strategic behaviour, indicating that both external and internal factors predict strategy choice, which in itself is linked to the desire to satisfy multiple goals (including consecutively), and is contingent on person and situational factors. This multi-goaling perspective of strategic behaviour provides a novel contribution to the literature, and advances both affect and action regulation theories. I also hope to present phase two of this project at next year's DOP.

To date, I have been disseminating the results (mainly of phase one) by giving presentations of my work, and engaging with the media:

-   Russell, E. (2014). Dealing with email at work: Bad habits and strategies. Presenting at the *British Psychological Society Division of Occupational Psychology Conference,* January 8-10th, 2014. The Grand Hotel, Brighton.
-   Russell, E. (2013). Managing your digital communications: A focus on email and smartphone strategies at work. Presented at the 'Research in Practice' Seminar Series, Kingston Business School: April 25th, 2013 6-8pm.
-   Russell, E. (2013). Yay! Yet another email! *A View from The Hill: The magazine of Kingston Business School and Kingston Law School, Spring 2013,* pp 2-3.Accessed at: [http://www.e-pages.dk/kingstonreview/8/]
-   Russell, E. (2012) cited by Carly Chynoweth. A Case of Fatal Distraction. *The Sunday Times,* September 23rd, 2012. Accessed at:
    [http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/public/Appointments/article1130781.ece]

N.b. The Brighton conference press office team have selected my paper to be of especial interest to the media and are issuing a press release about the content. The Research in Practice series was an evening seminar open to staff, students, alumni and members of the local business community. 'A View from the Hill' is the magazine issued to all alumni of Kingston Business and Law Schools. It is issued annually. The Sunday Times article included citations from me, following an interview by the author about email interruptions. The RBT was not specifically mentioned in this article unfortunately.