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# **Communication and Effective Email Usage in Saudi Arabia**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focusses on issues related to the limitation of effective email service usage that can, in turn, affect the quality of communication in Middle Eastern countries' organisations. The use of email services have become more common in Middle Eastern countries following the recent introduction of electronic technologies and email systems are now used as a way to manage everyday work in Saudi Arabia organisations and universities. However, most employees in Saudi Arabian organisations and universities are not fully familiar with the use of email services and do not use them effectively, rarely checking or replying to their emails and leaving their mailboxes cluttered with unwanted emails they have not deleted. A properly functioning email service could lead to better communication which could, in turn, lead to better information security systems across Saudi Arabian universities. Princess Nora University (PNU) is used as a case study.

Most universities and organisations worldwide have their own guidelines for effective use of email and make them available to their employees, whether in the form of formal training, or published guidelines. Unfortunately, few universities in Saudi Arabia have guidelines for effective use of email features for their employees. A survey has been conducted to measure the effectiveness of email usage within a single Saudi Arabian university, PNU. Based on the survey results and an analysis of the role of the Saudi culture and environment, culturally adapted guidelines will be implemented for effective usage of email at PNU. The guidelines should help in motivating employees to make greater and more effective use of the email service to improve communication between employees.

## **1. Introduction**

Electronic mail commonly known as email involves the sending and receiving of digital messages over communication networks such as the internet. The use of email started in 1965 principally to support the copying of files from one computer to another [1]. It was not until 1996 when the first web-based free email service, Hotmail, was introduced that email became a common, flexible, informal and cost effective way to do business [2]. There was gradual uptake in the use of email during the late 90s within the western world, with a corresponding development of email etiquette and organisational rules. During this period we started to see the gradual decline in the use of the postal system for business communication, and the superseding of first generation digital messaging equipment such as fax machines. However, within the Middle East the lack of appropriate support and infrastructure during that period limited its use until relatively recently. The rapid uptake in recent years has seen efforts to develop suitable email etiquette and rules for organisations in the region, and those developments have, in this case been outpaced by the uptake of the technology. Where the Middle Eastern region lagged behind in the use of PCs and Laptops to use email, a new generation of mobile technology saw access to email through mobile devices become far more popular in recent years [1] further complicating issues relating to the introduction of email into the region. Many other communication application tools have of course emerged more recently, however email is still the most commonly used at work [3, 2].

The Internet was introduced in the Arab golf countries, especially Saudi Arabia in 1997; however the use of email at work, in many organisations, was not introduced until 2011. Many employees are not familiar with or don't use email services effectively in Saudi Arabia. This paper argues that properly utilised email services and tools can have a significant positive effect on communication in multicultural organisations, particularly those with segregated work environments.

## **2. Methodology Adopted**

The purpose of this paper is to study, examine and evaluate current email usage at PNU and, based on the study, determine suitable email usage guidelines with the end goal of making these available to all members of PNU including students and staff. The techniques used for this study are:

- A case study, which is used in this research for the purpose of understanding the PNU email system.
- Data gathered from observation of user behaviour.
- The use of surveys and consequent analysis of results

The survey conducted consisted of 11 questions, which required a variety of different types of answer ranging from boolean, multiple-choice, to open-ended questions. The survey was conducted in Arabic, which is translated into English for the purpose of this paper.

### 3. Data Analysis

The Survey was conducted with 212 participants from all type of employees at PNU whether they are male or female, managers, faculty, staff or students (see table 1).

Table 1: Participants according to their gender and position

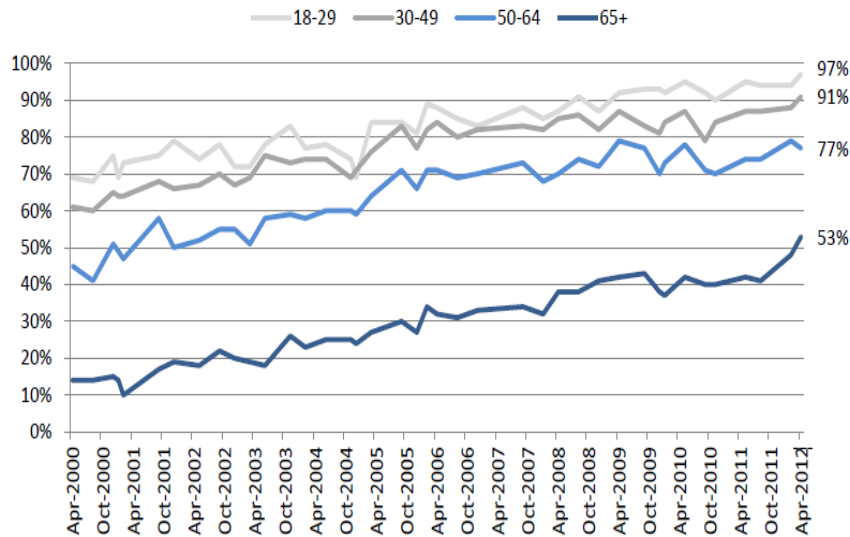
		Position				Total	Per-centage
		Manage-ment	Academic	Staff	Student		
Gender	Male	3	3	5	0	11	5%
	Female	11	65	67	58	201	95%
Total		14	68	72	58	212	100%
Percentage		7%	32%	34%	27%	100%	

Table 1 shows no male student participants, PNU is an all female university. Out of the 212 participants only 7% (21% male) are in management roles, 32% (4% male) held academic positions, 34% (7% male) other staff and 27% (0% male) are students.

The focus of this particular study is to measure the effectiveness of users in conducting three email functions, sending, receiving and processing. It was noticed that the participants' answers varied depending on their roles within the organisation. The following sections will therefore analyse each question in relation to the position held within the organisation.

### 4. Position held and sending emails

Most of the management participants send email. Although generally the younger generation are the greatest users of the internet (see figure1), this is not reflected in the case study, where the students, who are the younger generation at PNU, send emails considerably less often than the others surveyed.



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys, April 2000-April 2012.

Figure 1: Proportion of internet users according users age [4]

Figure 1 shows that 97% of the population aged 18-29 use the internet, 91% of the population aged 30-49 use the internet, 77% of the population aged 50-65 use the internet and only 53% of the population aged 65+ do so. This confirms that the younger generation uses internet the most.

Table 2: Position held in relation to the frequency of sending job or course related emails at PNU

	sending job or course related emails					Total
	No answer	immediately	daily	weekly	monthly	
position Management	0	8	5	1	0	14
Academic	0	19	22	24	3	68
other staff	0	28	22	5	17	72
Student	2	3	8	14	31	58
Total	2	58	57	44	51	212

Table 2 shows that 53% (31 out of 58) of students participating send email monthly. One of the reasons could be that the university email account was introduced only last year. Some students may not even have activated their email account yet.

There is a huge gap difference between university's employees, management, academic and other staff, and students. For example, most of management participants (13 out of 14) send email at least once a day.

## 5. Position held and checking emails

The checking of emails is one of the email functions that should logically have a positive effect in the overall usage of email as a communication tool. The analysed data collected for this feature indicated that the majority of participants do check their email regularly (see table 3).

Table 3: Position held in relation to the frequency of checking work emails

		Checking work email account				Total
		Immediately	daily	weekly	monthly	
position	management	6	7	1	0	14
	academic	21	24	21	2	68
	other staff	28	27	11	6	72
	student	6	16	15	21	58
Total		61	74	48	29	212

The table shows that Management usually check and read their emails at least once a day with only one out of 14 failing to do so. Of the academic staff around two thirds check their emails at least once a day and amongst other staff this raises to just over three quarters. In contrast, the proportion of students who check their emails at least once a day is currently a minority with just over a third doing so and more than a third only check their emails on a monthly basis. However, taken with the results from the previous question we hypothesised that the regular checking of email may well be a precursor for the regular sending of email. Therefore it would be beneficial to conduct a follow-up study to determine whether the rate of checking continues to increase, and whether that also leads to a corresponding, if lagging increase in the sending of email.

This hypothesis is born out in the analysis of the data collected, a strong positive correlation (0.627) between the frequency of sending and the frequency of checking email was identified, as shown in table 4.

As sending email increases, the checking of email also increases. The correlation ( $r=0.627$ ) is significant at the ( $p<0.01$ ) level (2-tailed). The Sig. (2-tailed) is equal to (.000). (.000) does not actually mean zero, it is rounded to its nearest 3 digits it could be a number that is less than 0.0005.

Table 4: Correlations between sending and checking work email

		send job or course related emails	check your work email account
send job or course related emails	Pearson Correlation	1	.627**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	212	212
check your work email account	Pearson Correlation	.627**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	212	212

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 6. Position held and response to work emails

Responding to emails is another email function that if used appropriately should have a positive impact on the overall use of emails within an organisation. The analysed data collected for PNU indicated that the majority of participants respond to their email regularly as shown in table 5.

Table 5: Position held in relation to the frequency of responding to work emails

	responding to email that requires a response				Total
	immediately	daily	weekly	monthly	
Position management	9	4	1	0	14
academic	20	32	11	5	68
other staff	46	18	6	2	72
student	16	20	16	6	58
Total	91	74	34	13	212

The table shows that most (13 out of 14) managers reported responding to emails within 24 hours. Around 75% of academics and around 90% of other staff also claim a response rate of within 24 hours. Interestingly, the student population tends not to be so prompt with their responses with less than two thirds responding the same day.

The results for the claimed email response times however, do show an anomaly when compared with the frequency in which the participants check and read their emails. A proportion of each group of participants has claimed they respond to emails at a frequency greater than they check their emails. This would imply that some participants respond to emails before they have read them.

There is clearly an error in the data, though it is not obvious at the time of writing whether the participants were giving incorrect data consciously in an attempt to appear more competent in their use of the email system or subconsciously.

## 7. Email response rate

Although almost all types of participants claimed to respond to emails immediately or daily, when asked about other people's response to the work emails they sent, a different picture emerges with all type of the participants claiming that they did not get responses back to the emails they send themselves (see table 6).

Table 6: Email response rate at PNU

		not receive any reply to emails				Total
		Yes	%	no	%	
position	management	13	93%	1	7%	14
	academic	46	68%	22	22%	68
	other staff	50	69%	22	21%	72
	student	48	83%	10	17%	58
Total		157		55		212

The results indicate that email is currently proving ineffective as a means of communication with only 26% receiving replies to their emails. Clearly this does not fit well with the results of the earlier questions about response rates, and may provide a more accurate picture of the situation than that indicated by asking people about their own response to emails.

## 8. Email Usage Issues

The analysed data collected identified a number of issues through additional, open ended questions. Many participants, 30 out of 212, reported issues relating to infrastructure problems such as network coverage in the university, complaining the network was either slow or lacking in coverage. Some participants (12) complained that the email systems frequently failed either completely or behaved unpredictably in terms of synchronising messages for sending and receiving.

The responses also produced some interesting reasons relating to the way and frequency with which employees responded to emails, claiming:

- They received too many emails to reply
- That they frequently needed to get check with their management before responding.
- That they needed more time to collect the information to reply.



- That delays in response were often caused by those in charge not being available when needed.
- That they did not understand the emails they were sent or that the emails were not clear in their intentions
- That emails are received from unknown or untrusted senders
- That the return address supplied was un-routable

However, some responses and observations indicated that email is often just neglected with some not checking their email regularly enough. Curiously, some believed that reading email using the supplied email client within PNU has a time limit restriction of half an hour or so after which it needed to be reopened and this effected when and how often they checked their email. This certainly shows the need to provide specific tailored training for those using the email system to prevent unfounded rumours affecting the efficiency of communication.

## **9. Discussion of the Findings**

PNU have a segregation working environment in which men work in an isolated location from women as it is in all Saudi Arabian universities. Communication in this kind of environment is limited so the effective usage of email as a way of communicating between parties is important. Email should be an easy and fast means of information communication. Buckley [5] confirms that emails can be a fast, reliable and archival way to exchange information. However communication by email appears to be ineffective at PNU despite the need to facilitate the communication between males and females at the university.

Some of the reasons for the failure can be identified by exploring the culture of Saudi Arabian institutions as noted in the authors' previous work [6]. This earlier research identifies the following characteristics of Saudi culture which can affect the use of email:

1. **Losing face:** The anomaly of the survey participants claiming to respond to emails more frequently than they read them could be accounted for by this characteristic. Admitting to not checking email regularly is not seen as a criticism, so the participants are willing to admit they do not check their emails very often. However, there is an implied criticism of anyone who does not respond to a question or does not take an action requested of them, so the participants did not want give answers that would show them in a bad light as they would "lose face". This characteristic can be seen in other aspects of working life where employees will never admit there can be anything that is less than perfect [6].
2. **Nepotism:** Many employees in Saudi organisations obtain their position through their contacts, often part of their extended family, and this has led to ongoing failures relating to employees not having the right

qualifications for a given job. This leaves many employees in roles for which they are unqualified or under qualified, and under trained. This also tends to make these employees very sensitive to criticism and very reluctant to admit failures such as slow email response times.

3. **Hierarchy:** The strong hierarchical structures in Saudi society and employment means that junior staff have been observed to tend towards doing only what they are told, rather than innovating themselves. This may be reflected in some of the reasons given for not responding to emails, as staff are reluctant to respond without the expressed approval of their superiors. This type of behaviour may seem more unusual to the western world, but is a deeply rooted cultural consideration for Saudi Arabia. It is considered better not to do anything at all rather than do something they had not been told to do by their superiors.
4. **Wealth:** The wealth of the nation has meant the introduction of IT, albeit heavily delayed has been rapid in recent years with employees finding themselves using technology for which they have no experience and understanding. Email is a technology that many employees do not understand fully. It was observed that, for example, not all email users understood the CC and BCC fields of their email application. Less obvious, but equally significant, the users did not understand the need to structure emails concisely, to be clear what action is expected of the reader and to not copy in multiple users unnecessarily. Indeed it could be argued that in many fully developed countries this understanding is often lacking! One of the consequences of this lack of understanding is that many users get too many emails, many of which are long and unclear what they are about. It is, therefore, unsurprising that responding to such emails is considered too time consuming and unimportant by some users.

It is clear that PNU email users need to use the facilities of their email system more effectively to avoid the issues they are facing now. Therefore they need training programmes in how to use the email feature properly. To overcome some of the problems above, email users need the senior management to approve effective email usage guidelines to help them improve their communication via emails. These guidelines will need to inform as well as guide, acting as a tutorial on the use of the email application, explaining how to use the technology as well as the good practices on using the system effectively. Effective email usage guidelines need to be implemented and made available to all PNU email users. The implemented email usage guidelines could also then be adopted by other Saudi Arabian universities since they all run similar environment and business culture.

## **10. Development of Effective Email Usage Guidelines**

To fulfil the requirement to instigate guidelines for effective email use, the authors' research includes the development of guidelines for PNU. The guidelines will

cover the main features of email use for sending, checking, receiving and replying to emails similar to those produced by other universities [7, 8, 9]. However, the guidelines will go further, to explain the basic functionality of an email application, for example explaining the use of common functionality such as the field to help ensure all users avoid ineffective communication practices.

The guidelines for use of email will describe typical good practice. Given the unique issues relating to communication in this region these guidelines may seem either over restrictive or unusually precise to those inhabiting western countries. For example stating that the body of the email should contain a message with the following characteristics:

- The messages should be succinct
- The messages should be written in a language known to the recipient
- The message should cover one topic only to encourage a quick reply
- It should indicate the timescale in which a reply is required
- It should clearly state any other action required of the user such as calling or setting a meeting time
- It should finish with a signature to make it look more professional [10], with a typical signature containing the sender's:
  - o Name and job title
  - o Department and college name
  - o Address and email address
  - o Mobile, telephone and fax numbers.

Guidelines will also include the general good practice of email housekeeping, such as activating out-of-office automatic reply when on holiday, organising email in groups and folders, using message threads [3], and deleting unwanted emails. Critically, strong guidelines will also be included effectively for receiving, checking and replying to an email message, stressing that time is crucial in these email actions. If it can be shown to users that a lack of any reply will be considered more rude than even a negative reply, causing the user to lose face though being seen to be unhelpful, then one of the barriers to effective use of email could be overcome.

## **11. Conclusion**

This paper has described research to investigate the use of email in a Saudi Arabian organisation, the Princess Nora University. It was found that, although there is an increased need for email communication in a Saudi environment because of the gender separation, email was ineffective in the way it was being used. The results of a survey found that email was ineffective because many users did not check their emails very frequently, and that they did not receive replies to emails very promptly if they received a reply at all, despite their claim that they themselves always gave a prompt reply.

By drawing on their earlier work on the Saudi Arabian culture and environment, reasons for the failure of email as a communications tool were identified. To overcome the problems, this paper suggests detailed tutorials and guidelines for using email need to be developed that is tailored to the needs of the Saudi culture. These guidelines need to be approved and recommended by the most senior management in the organisation so that they become instructions from the users' managers, which in Saudi culture means that they are more likely to be followed without question.

Future work will focus on developing and testing the guidelines to see if this Saudi-based solution to a problem of the Saudi culture and environment can ensure that email can become an effective communications method in gender divided Saudi Arabian organisations.

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