

Evolving Email

BY DAVID CREELMAN

The biggest untapped opportunity for organizational effectiveness is email.

Managerial and professional staffs spend a big hunk of every day on email. It is the single most important means for control, coordination and communication. Yet how much time does HR invest in creating the means so that this tool for control, coordination and communication is used effectively?

One stumbles a bit here, because while HR leaders can imagine providing training on using email, the broader sense that HR should “create the means to make email more effective” (to repeat my own awkward phrase) feels outside the scope of the function. Yet if HR doesn’t grab hold of this, who will?

Let me ease the discomfort by pointing to something concrete. I recently spoke to David Arella of 4 Spires (www.4spires.com). He reached out to me because of things I'd written about conversation as a technology. My point was that managers spend 80% of their time in conversation, and making those conversations effective is by no means simple; HR should think of conversations as a sophisticated “technology” for getting things done, not just a trivial everyday act. Arella is interested in “managed conversations” and because many, even most, conversations take place in email—and because email has all the opportunities that come with any online technology—Arella is interested in email.

The starting point is the recognition that conversation is not just about sharing information. A big part of conversation is about making commitments. You ask me to do something by some date. I reply that I will do it. That kind of promise is the key to control and coordination.

The theoretical underpinning for this is speech act theory. If you are a keener like me you will have read the background work by philosophers JL Austin and John Searle, but the practical application of speech act theory comes from Fernando Flores. Flores elucidated the small number of elements of a conversation that results in commitments. Basically it starts with a person making a request, and then someone accepting it, rejecting it or making a counter-offer. When the request is fulfilled and acknowledged as suitable, that commitment cycle is complete.

Flores believes that if people are deliberate about these keys elements of conversation, organizations would work more effectively. What better way to enable this than to add functionality to email that helps clarify and track the conversations that manage commitments? This is exactly what 4 Spires is attempting to do.

If you are old enough and geeky enough, you will remember that 4 Spires is not the first to try this. Flores himself created an communication application called the Coordinator which attempted to enforce his view of how conversations should be conducted. This wasn't a success, and my understanding is that it was due to overzealousness on Flores’ part. You wanted to send an email saying “Great game last night!” and the Coordinator would make you decide if that was a request, a counter-offer or whatever. Arella has learned



from this experience and has a system that is much lighter on its feet; it gives you the option of a disciplined email conversation that manages commitments but imposes nothing.

Let's imagine you are running a project that involves 5 or 6 people and a few of their own direct reports. Everyone knows this kind of project can be hard to keep track of. Is everyone doing what they are supposed to? Has something fallen off the rails? Project management software is not suited to this sort of thing; it's more trouble than it's worth. But if your email program is tracking who has committed to what by when, then there is an automatically generated record of what is going on. It becomes easy to see "What are the things Joe is supposed to be doing?" or "What deliverables ought to be back to me today?" Tracking who is doing what by when, need not be a separate activity, it happens automatically simply by ticking a few boxes on an email. This is the new face of project management.

One thing that also falls out of this simple commitment tracking is who has done what, who is done on time, and who is consistently late on meeting their commitments. As always, any metric is simply the launch pad for more investigation, but if an employee is consistently late it raises the question of whether the employee is overworked, under skilled or simply poor at estimating how long something will take. This is important management insight. It's the new face of performance management.

Having structured data online about conversations and commitments leads to many possibilities: potentially you can look at all the commitments an employee has made; you can look at all the deliverables you expect this week; you can see if elements of your project are being held up by people who have made, but not fulfilled, commitments to your own direct reports.

Management is mainly about conversations, and important conversations are about commitments. Most commitments are made by email and so if we track this we can manage it. It's that simple.

Email is the biggest thing to happen in management in the past few decades, but we've kind of just let it happen. We've never really grabbed hold of it as the powerful tool it is. If a whole department can worry about the control tool of accounting; why not pay similar attention to the much more expansive tool of email?

Managed conversations in the 4 Spires way is not the only thing you can do to improve email. Google made a bold attempt with Wave to capture conversations as a page rather than a string of messages. That didn't pan out, but I'm confident the idea will re-emerge in a different form. I mentioned at the start the comfortable idea of providing training on email. That makes sense too. The point is to realize that in email we have a monster of a tool; investment in managing that tool better could have an extraordinary impact on organizational effectiveness.

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management (www.creelmanresearch.com). If you want help with interesting HR issues, get in touch by emailing dcreelman@creelmanresearch.com