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# **Email as a Facilitator of Power Plays: Analysis of Political Events at a University**

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## **Introduction**

Interest in the diffusion process of email has been growing steadily. Whereas, initially, successful email implementations had been attributed to technological aspects (Pliskin, 1989; Pliskin, et al., 1989), more recently nontechnological explanations have received considerable attention (Pliskin and Romm, 1990). Lynne Markus, in a recent paper on email use (1994), contrasts individuallevel explanations with collectivelevel explanations and noting that the former considerations are not enough to explain why senior managers choose email for some of their communication tasks. The main argument behind the latter school of thought is that the diffusion of any technology is a social matter which depends on whether the technology is perceived as "socially appropriate" by the community of potential users.

Thus, the decision of individuals to adopt email will therefore depend on whether this technology is seen as capable of serving their unique social needs within their community (Culnan and Markus, 1987). It will also depend on the type of usages that email lends itself to and the degree to which these usages are tolerated within the community. For example, it has been demonstrated by Romm and Pliskin (1994) that the successful diffusion of email can be greatly affected by users' realising its tremendous potential for political usage. The thrust of much of this early research has been to view e-mail as a dependent variable, i.e., to concentrate on what causes email to be successfully implemented in organisations, and to look for explanations for why it is accepted and how its diffusion is affected by other organisational processes (e.g., Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993).

It is only in recent years that email has begun to be researched as an independent variable that causes or affects other organisational processes (Kling, 1995). Sproull and Kiesler, for instance, argue that email has a democratising effect on organisations because it enables people who are at the periphery of organisations to become more visible, and facilitates communication between people at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy and those at the top. Similarly, Finholt and Sproull (1990) demonstrate how email can

facilitate group decision making and bring about group unity and cohesion. Rice's series of investigations (Rice, 1987; Rice, 1992; Rice, 1993) deal with the effect of networks on group behaviour in the workplace, with particular emphasis on how membership in networks affects members' attitudes about the new technology, and promote group innovation.

The purpose of this research is to add to the understanding of the role of email in organizational power and politics. We build on a case study that took place at a university and explore the WAYS in which BOTH management and employees used email to further their unique political goals and conclude with a discussion of the implications from this case to email research and practice. Data for this study were collected by the authors at a University which is referred to as UIM, reflecting its InterMediate size in terms of the number of students (about 15,000), academics (about 500), and administrative staff (about 200). Textual analysis, interviews, and observations were employed in the study. These were comprehensive and mutually supportive. The actual names of organizations and people have been withheld to protect their anonymity.

### **Case Study**

Early in 1994 Ms. Banes, a biologist who started her career as a Ph.D. student and gradually worked her way up to become a tenured Associate Professor, found out that she will not be nominated department chair. By mid-January, she turned for help to The UIM Senior Women's Forum, which consisted of all female Full Professors and several female Associate Professors. When she presented her sexdiscrimination claims, many agreed that this was not an isolated incident but rather part of a discriminatory culture at UIM. There was a consensus among Forum members that a first step toward improvement would be of the position of Head of the antidiscrimination unit be upgraded to the equivalent of "Provost for Equity". Three Forum members then wrote a private letter to Mr. Smith, UIM's President since 1987, proposing that a Provost for Equity be nominated. To the Forum's surprise, instead of responding to the letter directly, Mr. Smith chose to make an announcement during the next Senate meeting that he was going to invite ALL senior women at UIM to discuss issues that are of concern to them.

During the same Senate meeting Mr. Smith also announced his resignation and the appointment of a search committee for his successor. Although he and other top managers considered Mr. Clark, a brilliant researcher who was hired by the president a few years earlier to implement his innovative policies, as a natural successor. Among the people appointed to The Search Committee was Ms. Laval, who held a position of fulltime Assistant Professor at the Department of English since 1992. In February 1994, Ms. Laval sent an email message to Mr. Smith, with email copies to all members of UIM community, objecting to his inviting only the "senior women" to the announced discussion because discrimination against women at UIM was not limited to senior levels.

The President responded to Ms. Laval by e-mail on the same day, with copies to the whole UIM community, indicating that he would be happy to meet with both senior and

junior women faculty. A series of email messages from Ms. Laval followed, with wide distribution on email, inviting interested women to attend a meeting of the Women's Section of The Union, intended to preempt the upcoming discussion with Mr. Smith, and to subscribe to a new electronic distribution list, established by her to support her efforts.

The preemptive Union meeting was chaired by Ms. Laval and attended by a record number of women, many of whom were not Union members. Most of the members of the Senior Women Forum were present. They explained that their proposal to appoint a Provost for Equity should be supported by the Union since it would be effective in achieving significant improvement in the status of all women. Although their proposal received strong support from many of the women in the room, it was evident that Ms. Laval opposed the proposal, even though she tried to appear neutral. Following the preemptive Union meeting, she distributed by e-mail the issues of concern to women on campus. The issue list included gender bias in promotion criteria, child care, participation of women in university committees, and discrimination against women in parttime positions. Ms. Laval concluded this list by stating that the proposal to nominate a Provost for Equity "did not enjoy uniform support" during the preemptive Union meeting.

The discussion that was promised by the president, to which all junior and senior women academics were invited, was held early in March 1994 in the presence of 30 women. It started with a series of anecdotal stories, on how women have been discriminated in the university, and developed to a discussion of structural issues. Ms. Banes then confronted the President and said that a Provost for Equity, if appointed, might help cope with the problems. The discussion was concluded with the President announcing that he would recommend to the Senate that a committee be appointed to address the problem.

Indeed, by the end of March 1994, The Committee was appointed by the Senate to study the status of women at UIM. Female and male members of the academic community were urged through a series of email messages to submit gender issues that were of concern to them. Two months later, right around the time that Mr. Clark went into office as UIM next President, The Committee presented its report to the Senate. The report's major recommendation was that the antidiscrimination unit should be upgraded and receive more resources. The appointment of a Provost for Equity was not on the list of recommendations. Mr. Clark announced that he will be studying the report in depth and will return to Senate with a policy statement at the beginning of the new school year in September 1994. In April 1995, almost a year after the Senate committee has completed its work, not one of the recommendations in the report has been implemented.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

How can we explain the events that are described in the case study? Is it a simple case of battle of the sexes? Or is it a much more complex set of events where men and women at different levels of the organization have combined forces, using email, to achieve their political objectives? Because a qualitative research methodology was used in this study, one can only speculate as to the explanations for the case conflicts. For instance, according to the Leader Member Exchange Model (LMX) theory (Graen, et al., 1982),

the case events reflect a conflict between the INGroup (including Mr. Clark and Ms. Laval) and the OUTGroup (including Ms. Banes) at UIM.

However, neither the LMX theory nor other explanations (Millett, et al., 1970; Robbins, et al., 1994) would hold if it were not for email. It was email which made it possible for Ms. Laval to outwardly attack the President and, at the same time, facilitate the conditions that eventually allowed the InGroup to join forces and to make sure that the Senior women's demand for appointment of a Provost for Equity was not met. Email also allowed the two coalitions (the Senior Women Forum and the Union Women) to communicate. In fact, in the UIM case, electronic mailing lists turned a simple exchange between a faculty member and the President into a major political crisis, involving a large number of players and spectators. Furthermore, the electronic mailing lists turned UIM academics from isolated individuals into an electronically linked community.

Thus, this study demonstrates two important aspects about the use of email in organizations. First, email is an effective means for democratizing organizations, opening channels of communication between members at the top and the bottom of the academic hierarchy. Email can create a perception of smallness, allowing large organizations to experience proximity and intimacy which are normally typical of much smaller groups. Second, thanks to its broadcasting feature (e.g., electronic mailing lists), email is a politically potent technology, lending itself quite easily to coalition building, on one hand, and to smart manoeuvring that can diminish the democratizing effects of email, on the other hand. E-mail allowed top management to collaborate with Ms. Laval in sidetracking the Senior Women from their demand to appoint a Provost for Equity. In this way, industrial harmony was achieved, at a politically sensitive time, by fostering through e-mail an illusion of democracy and of sensitivity to grass roots concerns.

Despite its limitations, it is possible to use the case study to provide some advice to practitioners: email is much more than a communication tool and that, therefore, policy making regarding email may have implications that go beyond its diffusion. In extreme cases of industrial disharmony, email can be the last straw that fuels a dangerous explosion in employeemanagement relations. Perhaps the most interesting practical conclusion that can be drawn from our research, and that all practitioners should be aware of, is that email has social consequences that go far beyond the technical success or failure of the implementation. Electronic distribution lists, in particular, can impact the organizations by shaping and altering their politics arena.

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