

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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### Cyberconflict: The Role of Email Communication

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Millions of people have incorporated the use of email as an effective and efficient means of communication. Effective because it delivers a clear and standard form of correspondence; efficient because of its ease and speed. However, although many view electronic messaging as a supplement to other norms of communication such as face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations, oftentimes this technological innovation serves as a replacement to such norms. Unlike face-to-face and telephone communication, however, email is limited to textual information as its primary form of communication. As a result, such a forum may unnecessarily escalate conflict between parties if not properly managed.

In many uneasy situations, clicking the "send" button seems more appealing than knocking on someone's door or even picking up the phone. In the workplace, sending an e-mail rather than engaging in a personal confrontation with the boss can often help suppress conflict in the workplace, according to a Wellington, New Zealand-based academic studying the use of e-mail.

Dr. Derek Wallace, a lecturer in academic and professional writing and communications at the Victoria University of Wellington, has been studying the use of e-mail as part of a "Language in the Workplace" project.

"E-mail is allowing people to manage their hierarchical or personal relationships by giving them a way of avoiding the physical brunt of these relations, and therefore of tolerating them," Wallace says. "From behind their screens they can communicate coolly over the top of their underlying tensions."[\[1\]](#)

But can the impersonal features of email help escalate some conflicts? According to the authors of a recent paper, employing email as a

means of resolving conflict carries a significant risk: that conflicts may escalate to irresolvable levels and even damage senders' and receivers' relationships.

Ramond A. Friedman and Steven C. Currall authored this paper entitled, "[E-Mail Escalation: Dispute Exacerbating Elements of Electronic Communication.](#)" (pdf) Friedman is an associate professor of management at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management, and Steven C. Currall is a William and Stephanie Sick Professor of Entrepreneurship and an associate professor of management, psychology and statistics at Rice University's Jones Graduate School of Management.

The paper discusses the properties inherent to face-to-face conversation that e-mail lacks: copresence (parties are in the same surroundings), visibility (parties see one another), audibility (parties hear speech timing and intonation), cotemporality (parties receive utterances as they are produced), simultaneity (parties send and receive messages at once) and sequentiality (parties take turns). Such properties allow the parties to "ground" the interaction — that is, to achieve a shared understanding about the encounter and a shared sense of participation. Grounding, timing and adjusting are all critically important tools in successful conflict resolution. [2]

Contrasting these properties with email's features, one can observe the anti-social aspect of electronic communication. The authors cite examples such as low feedback -- how the recipient reacts to the comments. As a result, misunderstandings and inadvertent insults may ensue causing social bonds to weaken and unnecessarily escalating the conflict. In another example, a lengthy message can include bundled arguments. This can result in forgetting to respond to one or more arguments. Moreover, the recipient may focus on the most upsetting arguments, thus ignoring others. If the sender notices these omissions, he/she may suspect a violation of interaction norms.

In their paper, Friedman and Currall list several pieces of advice for easing the impact of these effects while managing conflicts. For example, if possible try a face-to-face or telephone conversation to discuss disputes. In the case where email must be used, recognize that a perceived insult may have been unintentional, and mentally adjust to the statement accordingly by thinking through the meanings of the context.

In a world where communication has gone digital, one must adopt and practice proper etiquette in order to avoid such misunderstandings and escalations. Therefore, email participants should manage the inherent risk in order to resolve conflicts more productively.

## References

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