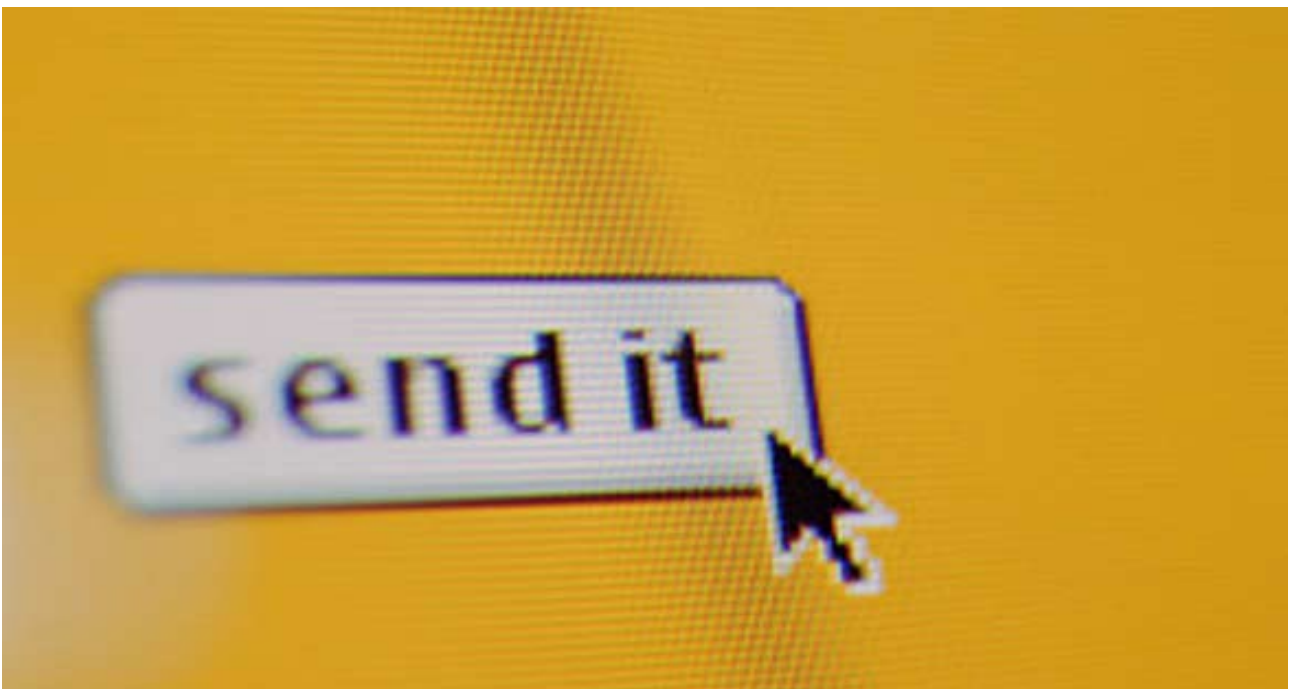


Lost in translation



Do your emails always say what you intend them to?

Emails are a prime source of workplace misunderstanding – and not just because one carefree click can send the wrong thing to the wrong person with disastrous consequences.

We think we're better at communicating by email than we really are, a study by Justin Kruger and colleagues at New York University has shown. They compared people's perceptions of how effectively they could communicate by email with how well the emails were actually understood, and found that miscommunication was far more common than the senders thought.

Misunderstanding often arises when the author of the email writes while thinking in a tone and context that the recipient is not party to, the study found. With 247 billion emails sent each day, according to a recent report, that's an awful lot of potential for misunderstanding.

Are you confident in your email ability?

In the first of a series of five studies, participants were asked to write sarcastic and serious statements about ten given topics. They were then split into two groups, with Group 1 emailing their statements to Group 2, who were asked to identify which statements were serious and which were sarcastic. Meanwhile, Group 1 was asked to predict how many of the statements

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Group 2 would interpret correctly. The results showed that while Group 1 thought their emails would be understood with a 97 per cent success rate, in fact only 84 per cent were.

The researchers then examined whether the rate of success was better when people emailed someone they knew. Can we understand a friend more easily than a stranger?

The study was repeated, this time with spoken statements as well as email statements. Half of the recipients were known to the sender, while half were strangers. Results indicated that spoken statements were far more likely to be correctly understood than written statements, showing that tone is more easily conveyed in speech. However, the participants remained overconfident, with both speech and writing.

Friends had no more success than strangers in correctly interpreting the statements, with

all participants identifying the tone at an equal rate. Increased familiarity does not, therefore, mean improved comprehension; just because you work with someone every day, doesn't mean they'll understand your quickfire email.

Why are we overconfident?

In a face-to-face conversation, it's not just your words that do the talking. Body language, gestures, inflections and conversational cues contribute to effective communication. These don't exist in emails, meaning that your words really do have to do all the talking.

We also tend to imagine our message with an 'internal voice' when composing. But while we may feel this helps us write, it makes it hard to imagine the thoughts and feelings of somebody else. We assume they 'hear' the same voice, but they may hear something else entirely.



Without the visual and auditory cues that we take for granted in face-to-face conversations, tone can easily be lost. Rushed emails may come across as cold, sharp or overly brisk, while a joke that would have been understood instantly in person can seem insensitive or even insulting.

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The internal voice

In the fourth study, the researchers sought to determine what part the internal voice played in creating miscommunication. They recorded Group 1 speaking the statements, half in their intended tone and half in the incorrect tone, ie with a serious tone being adopted for a sarcastic statement. Group 2 then listened to the recordings and tried to identify them.

Despite the statements being spoken, Group 2 still struggled to identify tone. Group 1 thought that 82 per cent of the statements would be interpreted correctly, but only 62.8 per cent were. The researchers attributed Group 1's overconfidence to them hearing their internal voices while reading out the statements.

Non-verbal communication

To examine how a lack of visual communication cues changes how we perceive tone, participants were split into three groups. Group 1 were shown a video of popular US TV show *Saturday Night Live*. This included a performance by Jack Handey, a comedian famous for his sarcastic one-liners, on the topic of 'deep thoughts'.

Group 2 were given a written list of Handey's thoughts instead. Both groups were asked to select the five they believed to be the funniest and to send these, via email, to Group 3. They were asked to rate how funny they thought each of the statements was, and to predict how funny Group 3 would find them on reading the emails.

The results showed a huge difference. Group 1, who viewed the video clip, found the statements funnier than Group 2, who just read them. Both predicted that Group 3 would find the statements just as funny as they had. As Group 1 had seen the video clip, they were able to pick up on the non-verbal cues that make it easier to communicate humour. However, when it came

to conveying this tone and humour via email, they were no more successful than those who had only read the statements.

Why does it matter?

If a miscommunication occurs, it can damage the sender's reputation. There have been many well-documented cases of email scandals that have come about not only because of tone, but also due to the lack of sending guidance.

Not only should we pay more attention to making sure we convey what we mean, but we need to remember that we are not quite as effective as we like to think – whatever that internal voice would like to have us believe.

Next time you write an email, read it back to yourself before sending, perhaps even out loud. Better still, run it past a colleague.

Many scandals have been caused by a lack of company guidelines on sending emails

Visit our blog for email tips, at www.writing-skills.com/blog/category/email. For information on our in-house course on writing effective emails, go to www.writing-skills.com/in-company-courses.

Kruger, J. Eple, N. Parker, J. & Ng, Z,W, (2005): Egocentrism Over Email: Can we Communicate as Well as We Think? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 89 (6), 925-936.

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