



Email policy for tertiary institutions – A study of University of Cape Coast

Kofi Ayebi-Arthur

Department of Science and Mathematics Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Abstract

The paper sought to look at the issues that affect the way an institution like UCC should deal with email and how best UCC can improve the usage of its email system by implementing an email policy. An evaluative research design was used to investigate the use of email system in UCC. Content analysis approach was used to study documents such as the ICT policies of the university. This was to find a policy relating to the use of email in the university. An email policy for the UCC guiding the use of email does not exist. However, there is an ICT policy for UCC that has scanty information relating to the use of email in UCC. An inference can be made from the ICT policy that the issue of email use in the university has not been adequately addressed. In the spirit of constructive criticism, it is the belief of the author that attending to the problems identified and recommendations offered in this study would help improve the use of the email system in University of Cape Coast significantly.

Keywords: email use, email system, email policy, University of Cape Coast.

Introduction

Communication in an organization is vital for its existence. If the flow of communication is removed from an organization, there would be no organization. The act of communication and its channels are needed for: exchanging information, exchanging options, making plans and proposals, reaching agreement, executing decisions, sending and fulfilling orders and conducting sales [1-3]. Written communication has developed from letters and reports to electronic mail (email). The ease and speed of sending and receiving of email has made email taken the place of written letters. With the span of internet and the increase in technologies, emails have become accessible and convenient means to exchange information for users. An email as defined by [4] is a 'computer-based message that can be electronically manipulated, stored, combined with other information and exchanged with other computers' (p. 49). As asserted by [5] email is the most used on-line work application. To survive in the 21st century the use of e-mail is a crucial tool of communications in any organisation. Employees of organisations enjoy the ease and speed of communication using an email system [6].

The use of an email system in an organisation has several benefits. [7] asserted that email is often used to break through bureaucracy. This is because the use of email evokes speedy response to an email. [6] claimed that email can have secondary social effects such as improved access to other individuals and innovative ways of communicating with them.[8] added that email allows all messages to be stored where necessary, routed to the most appropriate destination.

In addition, [9] described, "Email, like post and unlike other electronic communication, is both asynchronous and half-duplex, and thus does not require scheduled, endpoint-to-endpoint connectivity thus a sender and receiver can interact with their message autonomously and without distracting cross-talk" (p. 1). The receiver can respond to the message at a later date or immediately without disrupting

the flow of communication. In all instances, a replied email comes with the original message at bottom of the mail and thus one can refer to it at any point in time without drawing cabinets and pulling out files. Communication across different time zones is facilitated by the use of an email system that can result in considerable increase in productivity by supporting group work within and across an organisation. As noted by [10] email and other forms of electronic communications such as instant messaging, web browsing, and other services involving transmission of electronic information have been credited with increasing innovation, facilitating collaboration, and helping maintain social ties among people. The built-in file management tool in an email system make the use of email an advantage especially in collaborative work.

The use of an email system in an organisation however has some disadvantages. There is acknowledgement that the use of email can result in negative outcomes such as excessive time spent on unproductive work and a lack of attention to security [11]. In using email systems in an organisation [12] reported that often staff in organisations are left to establish the purpose and use of email systems. Allowing employees to have access and use email usually comes with exposing an organisation to wide and varied risks. The ease of downloading, copying, modifying, uploading and distributing copyrighted materials such as text, picture and application software is increased using the Internet of which an email system forms a component. There may be misuse of an organisation's email system by employees. Misuse includes using the email system of an organisation to send personal messages to other people not involved with the organisation's work. For example, two employees of Nissan Motor Corp. 'were fired from their job... when management discovered they were receiving sexually suggestive e-mail messages' [6]. As argued by [13] the wrongful use of email systems are severe because information and communication become less controllable..

Another form of misuse of an email system is the sending of confidential information to other people such as key competitors [14]. People routinely publish their e-mail addresses on websites with the intention that individuals should be able to contact them however, such contacts should be for lawful purposes. As discovered by [15] in a research measuring the individual perceptions of email, emails may also be used to vent frustration in the workplace as insulting messages are sent to co-workers or managers with very little thought. Sending of emails can help facilitate the spread of computer viruses [9, 16]. In using an email system of an organisation an employee may bind an employer to a contract because the recipient of the email can think of the email as a formal communication from the sender's organisation and that the sender has authority to send the email [17]. [18] points out that failing to adequately train staff on email system use can lead to misuse of these systems.

The advantages of using an email system in an organisation outweigh the disadvantages. However, it will not be difficult to surmise that an email system of an organisation can be misused. The use of an email system should be guided by a policy in order to maximise its advantages and minimise its disadvantages.

The need for an email governance policy in organisations. All organizations seek to regulate behaviour through the establishment of explicit procedures, codified as rules and regulations, or implicit controls, enforced through social norms [19]. Organizations that seek to use email for communication therefore need to have an email policy. This is because research by [20] found out that there is a gap between the employers' perception of proper email usage and employees perception of proper email usage. They also concluded that employees appear to exhibit the same usage of email at home as they do at work. [21] asserts there is difficulty of separating work-related emails from nonwork-related emails as many such emails contain social and personal news. Sometimes organisations leave staff to establish the purpose and use of email systems and at the same time many have not attended to developing or communicating email polices [12, 22, 23].

[15] advise that an email policy should not be created solely from the input of management. [23] advocate that policies for email should be negotiated between various levels of an organisation and if policies are top-down driven and do not include input of employees who actively use email then employers may hinder the productive uses that employees have for email. [24] opined that a successful e-mail policy must serve many purposes such as educating a workforce and giving specific directions on corporate behaviour. In addition, it will set the tone for corporate communication. . [20] stress that the adoption and diffusion of an email policy is important not only because it can forestall litigation but also because it improves employee morale and employee relations by building employee trust.

Best practices of email use in some organisations. Email policies, where they do exist, are poorly written and inadequately communicated [25]. [26] proposes that an email discussing official business between employees internally should be considered an internal memorandum. In similar manner, email sent out to a third party relating to official business is an external communication, and should be treated as official stationery, by being sent with the same corporate information that is contained on the stationery. Some organisations have developed policies and guidelines in order to manage email systems in their organisation. These policies have issues such as legality, monitoring, privacy and fair use of the email system. Examples of such organisations and their practices are discussed below.

The University of Florida (UF) provides an Online/Internet Privacy Statement which indicates how information is stored on its system. The webpage notes that “under Florida law, email addresses are public records and if you do not want your email address released in response to a public records request, do not send electronic mail to the University” [27]. UF Online/Internet Privacy Statement informs users that it values individuals’ privacy and actively seeks to preserve the privacy rights of those who share information with UF. The Internet privacy policy and practices UF has adopted for its official Web sites is explained. As reported by [8], in June 1999, Leeds Metropolitan University developed a policy on the Use and Abuse of Email that was distributed to staff in March 2000.

In an investigation of staff reactions to electronic monitoring and control of an email system in an organisation, [28] note that staff immediately reduced the number of non-business emails they sent internally and externally when email monitoring and control was implemented. As indicated by [23] employees do not support the establishment of formal email policies and that the employees prefer guidelines that will allow more autonomy over policies that inhibit their communication. Not that withstanding, most organisations have developed and implemented email policies to guide the usage of email by staff. The policy is made available to employees and staff are informed of their privacy, liabilities, and fair use of the email system their organisation.

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) provides electronic mail to staff and students to enhance communication and promote greater efficiency in teaching, research, community service and administration and has adopted standard corporate messaging systems. The University expects that all use of QUT email will be in accordance with the Acceptable use of information technology resources policy [29].

Computer Use Policies and Procedures document of University of Canterbury (UC) has a section that provides information relating specifically to the use of email [30]. All University staff and students have an official University email address associated with their computer account. Users are to ensure that email to this address is checked regularly. Users are also informed in the document that they may not send an email that purports to represent the University or its views, without proper authority. UC also has a Legal Disclaimer on Emails Policy [31]. As stated in the policy 'The use of email disclaimers is recommended as a protection against legal threats in instances such as breach of confidentiality (accidental or otherwise), transmission of viruses, negligent misstatement, and employer liability' (p. 1). Email disclaimers are used for some outgoing email from the University and are applied to all outgoing emails from the University of Canterbury.

Other organizations have developed guidelines and/or policies related to the use of electronic communications. [32] reported that some organizations are also attaching disclaimers and instructions at the bottom of each email in case email is sent to someone other than the intended recipient.

Theoretical framework. The study is underpinned by two theories. [33] Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and [34] Cultural lag hypothesis are used to explain the activities of the staff of University of Cape Coast (UCC) in the use of email. [33] uses Perceived usefulness to explain how people tend to use or not use an application to the extent they believe it will help them perform their job better. TAM is used to explain how members and staff of UCC viewed the introduction of email in the university. Perceived ease as used by [33] refers to "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort" (p. 320). [34] theory of cultural lag is used to explain the dissonance in the use of email for personal and official use. [34] states that "A cultural lag occurs when one of two parts of culture which are correlated changes before or in greater degree than the other part does, thereby causing less adjustment between the two parts that existed previously". Ogburn believed that as new inventions were introduced into existing society, maladjustment would occur and a period of adjustment would be required. This underlying idea forms the basis for the theory of cultural lag.

A cultural lag occurred when email was introduced into the university. This lag occurred again during the deployment of email addresses for use by units/departments/centres/faculties and members/staff of the university. Problems such as confidentiality security of email messages received and others explained in the next section influenced the use of the university's email system. The advantages of using the email system of the university outweigh the disadvantages and problems associated with using email for communication. As a result, members and staff of UCC have come to accept the use of email for both personal and official use in the university.

Internet connectivity and email use in University of Cape Coast. Internet usage at UCC has developed from the late 1990s when there was only one computer at the Computer Centre which was connected to an Internet service provider by dialup connection. The network setup later changed to a dedicated line, this was much more dependable, instead of the dial-up system. This copper wire dedicated line was maintained until the year 2003 when the university acquired a VSAT from an ISP, AFRINET who supplied UCC with internet connectivity. Pegasus Mail was used in handling email services. Everyone who used the email service had the same email address and the recipient name had to be typed in the subject line. A printout of the subject line was printed daily and emails were printed out later. This was inconvenient and as the cost of bandwidth reduced, staff of the University had their own internet connection and used free email services.

In 2007, there was a switch in ISP from AFRINET to Vodafone. This was a connection through a fibre optic cable with a bandwidth of 45mb/s. The mail server was formerly hosted by the University but as a result of fluctuation of electric current, unreliable power supply as well as lack of standby generators, the mail server is now hosted by Google platform since 2010.

A campus-wide computer network is available at UCC connecting most departments at the North campus and the Administration building at the South Campus. Most departments at the South campus individually pay for connectivity to the Internet by an ADSL broadband as they are not connected to the university's computer network. This is because the wireless network deployed at the South campus has been largely ineffective and unreliable. The campus-wide computer network is maintained by the Computer Centre. Anecdotal evidence shows that there are about 1000 email accounts for senior members and senior staff. Sixteen thousand student email accounts have been created but the accounts are not yet active.

Staff in UCC have been using their personal email address for personal and official communication so there was no difficulty in switching over to the use of the university email system. It

seemed that university staff that used their personal email for official communication as a result of the problems with initial use of the email system in the university have not come to terms in making the distinction between using personal email accounts for official business or personal use. The domain name and the top-level domain part of the UCC email address is part of the corporate identity of the university and its usage must be guided by a policy.

The paper sought to look at the issues that affect the way an institution like UCC should deal with email and how best UCC can improve the usage of its email system by implementing an email policy. In the spirit of constructive criticism, it is the belief of the author that attending to the problems identified and recommendations offered in this study would help improve the use of the email system in University of Cape Coast significantly. The author does not seek to denigrate the webmaster(s), the university and the staff.

Methodology

An evaluative research design was used to investigate the use of email system in UCC. As stated by [35], evaluation is the 'systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy' [35]. An evaluative research design can reveal whether policies work or not working and can enhance effectiveness of a programme. Conflicts of interests among stakeholders sometimes limit the usefulness of evaluative research as some programmes being run are influenced by political decisions. Content analysis approach was used to study documents such as the ICT policies of the university. This was to find a policy relating to the use of email in the university. In addition, the website of UCC was searched for the availabilities of email addresses of offices in the university. Also, the email directory of UCC was used to find email addresses of departments. The results are discussed below.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of documents such as the ICT policies of UCC revealed that an email policy for UCC guiding the use of email does not exist. However, there is an ICT policy for UCC that has scanty information relating to the use of email in UCC. The policy has been in existence since 2002. There was just a sentence on making available a central email directory. The email directory exists but only assessable to people in the directory. A new ICT policy is being drafted to replace the old policy. Under 'General Principle' in the new ICT draft policy there is a statement indicating that '...network administrators and users must respect the privacy of person-to-person communications in all form including telephone, electronic mail and file transfers' [36]. Another statement in the new draft policy was 'Use of the Internet and e-mail by faculty, staff and students is permitted and encouraged where such use is consistent with the University's mission' (p. 7).

It was expected that there will be guidance on how to use emails to ensure that UCC as an organisation and its employees are protected legally in the use of the email system. Legal protection in the form of a disclaimer for all outgoing email from the university's email system would have been most appropriate. There were no directions as to how the email system should be use. This includes if the email system should be used only for work-related messages or whether personal use is allowed. Instruction for use of tags such as "very important", "for your information only", "urgent" in emails is not included in the ICT policy. Instructions on modes of address and response when sending emails were not given.

An inference can be made from the ICT policy that the issue of email use in the university has not been adequately addressed. This confirms [12] report that often staff in organisations are left to establish the purpose and use of email systems and usually comes with exposing an organisation to wide and varied risks.

A search on UCC website showed that Faculties of Arts, Education, Law, Schools of Agriculture, Biological Sciences, Business, Medical Sciences, Physical Sciences, Centre for Continuing Education, Directorate of Organisation Development and Consultancy had their email address on their respective homepages. The School of Graduate Studies and Research however, did not have its email address on its homepage. Homepage of Centres/Institutes/Departments under the Faculties and Schools did not display their respective email address. Meanwhile, a check on the email directory of the University showed that the Centres/Institutes/Departments had email addresses.

Supporting Services such as Directorate of Academic Planning & Quality Assurance, Centre for International Education, Directorate of Organisation Development and Consultancy, and Computer Centre also had their email address on their respective homepages. However, Office of the Dean of Students did not have its email address on its homepage. The Directorate of Internal Audit and the Sports Section did not have homepages.

The Contact Directory of UCC on the university's website listed the email addresses of some of the principal officers of the University. These officers are: Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Librarian, and Director of Finance. Director of Internal Audit and Director of Health Services did not have their email addresses listed although a check on the email directory showed they had one. Having email addresses of principal officers listed will facilitate communication through email both within the university campus and externally to the outside world.

Although Centres/Institutes/Departments have email addresses created by the Computer Centre, these units are not aware that they have email addresses. These email addresses thus become inactive and is a source of concern. Centres/Institutes/Departments in UCC therefore do not communicate among themselves using the email system of the university. This is because there are inherent repercussions for inappropriate use of the email system. This finding is contrary to [7] assertion that email is often used to break bureaucracy. One of advantages of email which according to [10] is credited with increasing innovation, facilitating collaboration, and helping maintain social ties among people seems to be missing at UCC. Anecdotal evidence revealed that some of these departments are communicating using free email addresses from websites that are not related to the University although an email system exists in UCC. As people interact with various university units for various tasks such as appointments to work, communicating with departments/centres/units on issues such as collaborative work and linkages requests, one is left to wonder what email accounts are these requests sent to. Appropriate measures should be placed in order to avert issues that may arise as a result of confidentiality and privacy being breached in email correspondence.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper looked at the need for an email policy at UCC. Although an email policy did not exist in the university there was an ICT policy. The use of the university email system was not adequately addressed in the ICT policy. The results from content analysis of the ICT policy of UCC and the availability of official email addresses of units in the university have shown that there is a need for an email policy to guide the use of email in UCC. Examples of an email policy can be drawn from policies such as the one of QUT among others. All organizations seek to regulate behaviour through the establishment of explicit procedures, codified as rules and regulations, or implicit controls, enforced through social norms [19].

The policy will serve as guidance on how to use emails to ensure an organisation and its employees are protected. Adequate training on the policy is also essential to cover risks to both employer and employee. All employees should read this policy and sign an attestation that they have read the policy before they can use the organisation's email system. From time to time, the policy should be reviewed and updated and finally communicated to the users. Adding a disclaimer to outgoing emails will save an organisation like UCC from possible litigation by an employee. An

inclusion of the policy as standard part of new employee orientation procedures will be of great benefit to an organisation. Existing employees who wish to continue using email system of the organisation must always attest.

[15] advise that training should be given to employees on the issues involved in email. This should include information about the reasons that the policy was created and developed. An email policy must address if email should be used only for work-related messages. In addition, the legal liability of emails sent send received ought to be addressed. Explanation of privacy risks associated with email should be incorporated in the email policy. A note on forwarding and copying of emails should be incorporated in an email policy. Unnecessary forwarding and copying can clog the system and breach confidences. Suitable modes of address and response should be developed when sending emails. Emails should be treated as any other corporate communication.

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