



The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business

Email Miscommunication:

Chicago GSB study highlights business implications of e-mail

When it comes to email, what you say isn't necessarily what is heard. And, that disconnect can have serious business implications, according to new research by the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business.

GSB assistant professor of behavioural science, [Nick Epley](#) and his colleague, Justin Kruger, of New York University studied people's ability to communicate subtle emotions and intentions over both e-mail and the telephone, as well as people's beliefs about their ability to do so. Experimental results indicated that people believed they were equally able to communicate subtle intentions such as sarcasm or sincerity over email as they were over the telephone, but the actual ability to communicate varied dramatically.

In one of their experiments, participants were asked to send—either over e-mail or the telephone—20 statements to their partner, half of which, on average, were intended to be sincere and half sarcastic. Participants in both the e-mail and telephone conditions believed their recipients would accurately identify the tone of the message roughly 75% of the time. Although this was true of recipients who communicated over the telephone, recipients who communicated over e-mail accurately interpreted only 56% of the statements correctly—not statistically different from what one would observe by chance alone. Recipients believed, however, that they had interpreted 90% of the statements correctly, on average, in both the e-mail and telephone conditions. An additional experiment showed that participants were no better communicating with their friends than with strangers.

At the base of all this misunderstanding is egocentrism. A person's own knowledge about what they intend to convey blinds a person to the ambiguity inherent in their message, and makes it very difficult to recognize that others may interpret their message differently. There's a simple solution to making sure your message gets heard — use the phone. "E-mail is excellent for communicating content, but emotional matters are best handled through other mediums," Epley explains.

For more information contact: Arnold Longboy, +44 (0) 207070 2224.

E-mail: Arnold.Longboy@Chicagogsb.edu

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