BUSINESS COMMUNICATION NETIQUETTE – A NEED FOR THE QUALITY OF HUMAN RESOURCES

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Abstract: As business connections bring people all over the world together, it even more important for business people to learn how to effectively communicate with people belonging to different cultures. Therefore, business people must comply with certain rules specific to business communication, known as "etiquette" or, when speaking about online business communication, "netiquette". Yet, the question is whether business graduates/people do know how to apply these rules. This paper aims to analyze the extent to which business students and graduates are familiar with this concept and if they apply it.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE

International relations are extremely important in business. Establishing and maintaining relationships with international clients is the road to success in the business world. Finding a way how to effectively exchange ideas is possible on a variety of levels, and one of the main ways that all businesses communicate is through writing. Thus, a thorough understanding of international business communication etiquette is essential.

"Etiquette" is a French word, its literal meaning in English being "label". According to *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, "etiquette" denotes: **1.** (Sociology) the customs or rules governing behaviour regarded as correct or acceptable in social or official life; **2.** (Sociology) a conventional but unwritten code of practice followed by members of any of certain professions or groups." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* describes etiquette as: "1. the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life…; 2. an item of behaviour prescribed by rule or custom…" When applied to business, etiquette is the set of written and unwritten rules of conduct that make social interactions run better. Etiquette covers a set of rules for a variety of interactions and situations. All business dealings generally require proper etiquette from business people so that they leave the right impression on their partners. There are cases when business etiquette is more formal than personal etiquette because ignoring basic business etiquette might be detrimental to a business person's reputation and career. According to Ingram and Media (2012), business etiquette "encompasses the unique traditions, expectations and preferences that influence business relationships and customs in individual nations. Each country around the world features a unique business culture derived from its own social culture and history, although similarities can often be seen among nations in the same geographic region. Familiarizing yourself with the business etiquette of the countries in which you do business is a key to maintaining long-lasting business relationships."[http://smallbusiness.chron.com/business-etiquette-important-3100.html]

The set of rules regarding international business communication etiquette writing does not apply only to correspondence through traditional letters, but also to the Internet. The electronic mail, as a communication tool, is almost limitless, fast and inexpensive to use. In the business world it is used to transmit every type of correspondence the daily activity of business requires: simple messages, memos and letters, reports, tables of data, graphs and charts, blueprints, or pictures. Thus, the e-mail is the major communication method between business partners, yet, written correspondence via the Internet requires

that individuals are more careful regarding what they write and how they write it, that is the so-called "netiquette".

2. NETIQUETTE. THE CONCEPT AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

The word "netiquette" (short for "network etiquette" or "Internet etiquette") is a set of social conventions that facilitate interaction over networks, ranging from Usenet and mailing lists to blogs and forums. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netiquette].

When writing, words can be destructive as well as constructive, therefore words should be selected carefully. Edward Bulwer-Lytton once said that *"the pen is mightier than the sword."* [Gould 2010:63]. There are many cultures that are more formal than others, therefore it is important to be aware of the rules when sending written correspondence. Business etiquette takes into consideration that people of different cultures have different ways of looking at business transactions, yet, each business person can find a way to do so without disrespecting anyone. In the same way, business online communication requires the compliance with a set of rules so that the messages are received in the manner intended. E-mail has reduced the time between the sending of a traditional written message and its response, so much that the actual online written communication is often very similar to that of a spoken conversation. However, the participants in a spoken conversation have speech devices available to them that are unavailable in an online written communication which makes the latter more challenging than face-to-face communication. Voice inflections, tone, verbal pauses, and facial expressions contribute to a more accurate contextual reading of a spoken conversation, helping participants to rapidly perceive what they want to say. Consequently, it is the inability to use or rely on these means when writing or reading an e-mail message which has given rise to a set of techniques meant to solve this shortcoming. The writers need to be sure to get their messages across properly the first time and the best way to be sure that prospective customers are not annoyed, is to learn the "netiquette" rules when writing e-mails. In business correspondence, the way in which a document is set up follows a convention. Writers should use standard formatting so that their business documents are consistent in appearance with what the reader expects. Letters, reports, graphics, headings, and other elements are visual marks that make it easy for the reader to locate and understand information. A visual mark is an element the reader sees and interprets to have a particular meaning. Readability is a measure of how easy it is for the reader to understand the writing and locate information within a document. Readability is achieved through a combination of clear writing and effective formatting. All these elements combined help obtain the response expected from the reader. For a message to be readable, it should be presented in small segments with adequate white space. Information presented in long paragraphs is uncomfortable for the reader and physically tiring to read. All business forms of communication then, including e-mail, should be handled in a professional manner.

There are several reasons for which a company needs to implement netiquette rules: *a. professionalism* - by using proper e-mail language a company will convey a professional image; *b. efficiency* – e-mails that get to the point are much more effective than badly worded e-mails; *c. protection from liability* - employee awareness of e-mail risks will protect the company from very expensive law suits.

Studies show how business relationships, within the company and with other companies, are in danger due to the lack of business e-mail etiquette. A survey applied to 750 office workers in Spain, UK, France, Germany and Italy by PalmOne, shows that in the UK, 11% of the respondents admitted they deny the receipt of emails. The figures recorded in the rest of the countries are: Spain 4%, France and Italy 3%, and Germany

1%. Italians reply 60% of the time vs. 13% in the UK. Also, 81% of the respondents admit having negative feelings towards people who have bad spelling or talk about other topics not related to the subject. Usually, these negative feelings lead to distrust in the sender, and therefore, in the business relationship with him. [*Business Email Etiquette*, http://www.practicaletiquette.com/business-email-etiquette.html#INV]

In spite of all these, there are many companies which have still not realized how important their e-mail communications are. Many companies send email replies late or not at all, or send replies that do not actually answer the questions you asked. If a company is able to deal professionally with email, this will provide it with an important competitive edge. Moreover, by training employees about what they can and cannot say in an e-mail, the company they work for can be protected from strange liability issues. According to Flynn and Flynn, "[B]y requiring employees to use appropriate, businesslike language in all electronic communications, employers can limit their liability risks and improve the overall effectiveness of the organization's e-mail and Internet copy in the process." [Flynn and Flynn, 2003:53]

3. REASEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our study intends to identify the perception of business students and business people on the existence and forms of manifestation of the business netiquette phenomenon. The objectives of our research are: to determine the perception of the business students and business people regarding the need for business netiquette when communicating in business. The survey consisted in two parts. The first part contained ten YES/NO questions and the second part consisted in ten multiple choice questions. The questions tackled details that both business students and business graduates/people deal with on daily basis, like: the use of abbreviations and capital letters, the use of bullets, the need to use a signature when writing a message, or the time needed to reply a message. Surprisingly, the results obtained showed that both business students and business graduates/people still have a lot to learn how to apply and use the "golden" rules of business netiquette.

The results for the first question - *Netiquette suggests a business e-mail should be replied within a business day*. - reveal that 88.10% of the subjects agree with the statement, while a percentage of 11.90% consider that a business e-mail can be replied later than a business day. According to the rules of business netiquette, business e-mails should be answered quickly. People expect an answer to their e-mails fast, not next week. Fast response indicates that a business person is an active business person, always in charge, and highly responsible in what they do. Procrastination in answering e-mails indicates lack of professionalism. Another reason for a business person to answer e-mails within one day is that if customers do not receive a response within a reasonable amount of time, they will likely take their business elsewhere. Thus, the percentage of 11.90% of the respondents who answered YES to this question is rather high, in our opinion. The second question – *You can delete e-mail signatures and previous, redundant replies to shorten e-mail length*. – recorded the following results: 41.46% consider this a valid action, while 58.54% are against. The rules say that if an e-mail has become very long by going to and fro, it is acceptable to reduce its length by deleting e-mail signatures and previous replies. Of course, one should make sure that the most important parts are retained. An email signature should not double the e-mail's length, so it should be as short as possible (three lines is usually enough).

E-mail users open messages because of what is contained in the subject line. – The results for this question are, yet again, surprising: 88.10% consider the subject line very

important, while 11.90% do not pay attention to what the subject line contains. Like a headline in a newspaper article, it must be short (6-8 words) and it must be compelling. Using the right words in the subject line will prompt the reader to open the message fast. The fact that there are respondents who do not consider reading the subject line makes us believe that, most of the time, people or business people do not really know or do not pay attention to the importance of writing a good subject line. Next question - *Make your business e-mail stand out by formatting it with italics, colours, and special fonts.* – had the following results: 22.50% answered YES and 77.50% answered NO. According to the rules, the appearance of a document is the first impression the writer makes on the reader. That first glance at the message should be an open invitation to the receiver. *Format* refers to how written information is presented on the printed page or screen. Customizing an email with the use of special formatting techniques can often enhance the tone and appearance of the message. The bold or italics formats can be used to make certain words or phrases within an e-mail stand out, as well as colours can be applied to text and their backgrounds. Without properly formatted elements, the reader can easily become lost or distracted. Therefore, it is not against the rules to use colours or special formatting techniques to make the e-mail stand out, yet the overwhelming percentage of 77.50% of respondents answering NO to this question proves the opposite. Question number five is: *To indicate that your e-mail is very important, you can write it in capital letters*. The results are: 56.10% consider appropriate to use capital letters, while only 43.90% consider this action as inappropriate for e-mails. Writing an e-mail in capital letters is actually rude, as it looks like the sender is shouting. While this may be necessary for one word (or very occasionally for a whole sentence) in order to make a point, using it for the whole message is not acceptable. Question six: *Keep your language gender neutral*, obtained the following results: 85.37% answered YES and 14.63% do not consider the neutrality of the gender language as being an important aspect when writing business e-mails. Nowadays, using sexist language should be avoided. Revising to avoid sexist language will help make the message more accessible to readers who might otherwise feel excluded. Yet, when revising, the writer should avoid the easy edits that introduce stylistic clunkers such as "his/her" and "s/he," or the questionable grammar of a mixed version such as "one should wash their hands every day" ("one" is singular, but "their" is plural). Answering question number seven, *Use abbreviations whenever possible*, 22.50% favour the use of abbreviations while 77.50% are against this practice. In private messages, it would be acceptable to use abbreviations as long as the writer states their meaning the first time the abbreviations are used. However, these kinds of abbreviations are confusing to people on a listserv, especially as there are always new members joining. A business person should use abbreviations that are well known and documented. For example, FYI (*for your information*) and ASAP (*as soon as possible*) are fairly well known abbreviations and quite acceptable to use. Other abbreviations, such as BTW (*by the way*) and IMHO (*in my humble opinion*) are not to be used in a business e-mail. Question eight, *Use bulleted lists whenever possible*, recorded the following results: 63.41% of the respondents are in favour of this practice, while 36.59% do not consider it as part of business netiquette. Yet, due to their graphic separation and placement, bulleted lists are easier to survey than lists in sentences. A bulleted list is a common visualisation tool most of people are familiar with. Bulleted lists are easier to scan and read than full paragraphs. For instructions or long lists, numbered lists should be considered for easy reference. Question number nine, *Make sure your readers know who you are with a signature*, obtained the following results: 92.68% consider that a signature makes the difference and 7.32% do not value the importance of the signature in a business e-mail. In business, it is very important that the e-mail is prepared so that it automatically has a complete signature line which includes the

name of the company the writer works for, the writer's full name with title and business position, company address, company phone number and extension and the writer's work e-mail address. The last question is, *Press "send" before proofreading the message*. The results are the following: 14.63% say that it is not necessary to proofread the message before sending 85.37% answered YES. The fact that there are business students and business graduates who consider that it is perfectly acceptable not to proofread the message before sending it, is worrying. It is very important that when sending e-mails to business associates, the writer takes the time to ensure that these messages are written correctly. Having a permanent written record of the business partner's misspelled words is no laughing matter.

The second part of the survey addressed only the business students in order to see whether they know how to conceive a message in general and a business message, in particular. Regarding the first question, *Which of the following is the best advice when writing a business e-mail?*, 93.02% of the students agree to keep the information relatively short, precise and always polite with simple questions relating to what the writer expects to happen, while 6.98% consider important to make detailed demands in long paragraphs with the implication of wrong doing on the part of the receiver. Nobody chose the other two options, to use varied italics colors and special fonts because people like to see them and panic but then recover and decide to send the message by regular mail as this is definitely more secure. Next question requested to list in order of importance the differences between face-to-face business meetings and online information. 53.66% consider that the most important difference is that the writer's face cannot be seen so it is harder to convey that person's thoughts and easier to be misunderstood online. 43.99% agree that written communication should always be more polished and formal than real life spoken communication. 2.44% consider that while cursing is okay in real life it is strictly prohibited online. Question number three asked the students what is a very useful last thing to do before sending out any e-mail/business e-mail. 92.68% chose to read the e-mail through for spelling and grammatical errors to simplify the message if possible and to check the recipient's e-mail address. 4.88% chose all the choices at this question, including the option when the writer does not have to do anything, following the principle the quicker you send the message, the quicker they will receive it. 2.44% consider that time is important, choosing to check the time so the senders can remember when they sent it in case they call. The next question- *Why is it always good to use proper grammar and correct spelling in internet postings like message boards*?- showed that students are ignorant of some of the most important rules when communicating on-line with future business partners. 85.37% of the students believe that good grammar and spelling keep ambiguity to a minimum thereby communicating the message more clearly, while 9.76% think that people who are non-native English speakers will understand the writing easily. The same percentage, 2.44%, consider that using proper grammar and correct spelling is important because it is good manners and "you can be proud of yourself" and "you are always morally judged by how many typos you make." Question 15 checked whether the students knew why it was a good idea to try and use the cc: field moderately. 46.43% reckon that unless the recipient in the cc: field knows why they are receiving a copy of the message he or she may not act on the message but assume it is really only for the main recipient. 12.20% think that "the cc: can be confusing since the recipients might not know who is supposed to act on the message" and "it can sometimes devalue the main message depending on the context as it could be seen to depersonalize the main message." 29.27% took into consideration all the previous three reasons.   Regarding the question requiring a better solution than using bold or italic to emphasize meaning when writing a business e-mail, 78.05% think that it is important to use carefully chosen

words and phrases so that the meaning is clear and not ambiguous and unlikely to cause misunderstandings, while 21.95% consider that using capitals is a good solution. Next, the students were asked which reasons best reflect a so-called "Golden Rule" of netiquette. 78.05% took into consideration the human aspect, the fact that a real person is receiving the message. 12.20% believe that the senders should sometimes act friendly in chat and e-mails. 4.88% chose "spam your friends", while the same percentage, 2.44%, chose "only flame your friends by accident" and "all of the above", again showing that there students not aware of the "business netiquette" rules. The next item asked to choose a good statement about time delays between business e-mail exchanges. 58.54% chose to always reply within 24 hours and expect the same from someone else. 39.02% will try and reply within a 24-48 hour window but allow at least the same amount of time before sending a follow-on e-mail if not longer and 2.44% wait 36 hours before replying to any e-mail but send a follow-on e-mail within 24 hours if they do not hear anything. The last question asked for the definition of a business "welcome page" and how it can be useful. 90.24% believe that a business "welcome page" can give an impression of professionalism as well as introduce the company brand logo and overall interests. 7.32% define the "welcome page" as being the same with the home page, while 2.44% do not think it is useful for "welcome pages are always distracting and take too long to load."

4. CONCLUSIONS

For most professionals, communicating by e-mail is a part of daily life. E-mail is a very convenient way to communicate basic information to one or more people. Even though most professionals feel that e-mail makes their lives easier, there are also a number of difficulties related to e-mail usage, especially when communicating with international business partners. The survey applied to business students and business graduates/business people shows that the concept of "business netiquette" is still unknown to many of them. In many cases, the respondents did not make the difference between a general message and a professional message. The survey shows that many netiquette basic rules are disregarded when writing a professional e-mail. Many details making the difference between an average e-mail and a business message are not considered important by the students and business people alike. Thus, there is an acute need for the introduction of business netiquette in the business schools' curriculum and to train the employees how to use the rules needed in professional online communication.

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