

Editorial | *The Ever-Changing Face of Communication*

Taking Control of Business Expectations

By David W. Mykins, P.E., Chair CASE Executive Committee



Just the other day I was talking with a client and said, “I will fax that to you in a few minutes.” That might have been one of the first “senior moments” of my life, or at least the first I remember. I caught the mistake right away, and we both had a chuckle about how far technology has come in the course of our careers. However, the incident got me thinking about our use of technology.

In my career, I have seen our profession go from using calculators to computers, from hand drafting to BIM modeling, from telephone calls to emails, and from tape measures to laser scanners. These innovative technological advances have allowed us to examine, analyze, design and draw some of the most sophisticated and complex structures in history. They have increased the speed of our communication and the accuracy of our work, but these new sophisticated tools require new training and new quality control reviews to ensure the safety of the structures we design.

A short search through the archives of STRUCTURE magazine will produce a number of articles on the use of computers and software in design. In fact, in 2007 there was an article or editorial on this issue almost every month. There were even a couple of folks who predicted a crisis that would result in the collapse of structures. However, some authors provided very thorough examinations of the pitfalls of blind reliance on computer results, and practical suggestions for education and training to avoid getting into trouble. I believe that a decade later, while we still need to be vigilant in our use of technology for design, we also need to be aware of how we use technology in other aspects of our business.

Our entry-level engineers have never known a time without personal computers, and some even seem to have been born with a cell phone in their hands. They can text faster with two thumbs than I can type with two hands. Because of this, they are unafraid to adopt and use new technology. However, just as they need to be taught how to use structural analysis software properly, they must also be shown how to use technology for business communication.

According to a recent report by The Radicati Group, Inc., the average business email account receives 90 emails per day and sends 33 emails. This is the way we communicate most of the important information in our day to day work. With so much traffic coming in and out of our mailboxes, it seems appropriate that we devote some time to considering how it should be used. This topic may already be addressed in the company’s employee handbook, but should be dusted off once in a while and re-emphasized to ensure that users remain vigilant.

One of the best rules for email use was summed up by an attorney who said, “Don’t say anything in an email that you do not want to see blown up and shown on a big screen in a public courtroom.” With that in mind, we should be careful to make sure that our messages always remain respectful, professional, and factual. Also, because it is sometimes difficult to interpret the intended tone of a written message, it is a good idea to avoid using sarcasm in your communication. If you follow these simple rules, you may never have to worry about an accidental “reply all” response.



No discussion of electronic communication would be complete without including text messaging. Most of our younger engineers and their client counterparts are using text messages as the primary form of social communication; for some, it is becoming an increasingly common means of business communication. Because texting is more informal by nature, those who regularly use it can be tempted to include comments in their messages that they would never put in a written letter or email, which can be very risky if problems develop on a project and these communications become part of the record. For this reason, some firms prohibit the use of text messages for business communication.

Finally, what about social media? Almost every firm has a Facebook presence, and may also have Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat or some other social media account. There should be clear guidelines on who can post to the company’s social media accounts and what types of messages are appropriate. And, there also should be policies that address which work-related material is acceptable to share on an employee’s personal account. The purpose of these rules is not to limit anyone’s free speech, of course, but rather to protect against improper sharing of confidential information.

There are lots of excellent references that address the proper use of electronic communication and social media. The topic is covered in several of the CASE National Practice Guidelines and Tools that are available to our member firms free of charge. Take a few minutes to review the policies in your office and see if they need updating, and ensure that you are using these tools correctly. Feel free to email me or, if you want to go old school, send me a fax with your questions or comments. ■



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