The Novice Consultant and Electronic Mail: Strategies for and Implementation of Politeness Techniques in Different Organizational Contexts

Nancy Annett
Clemson University, nancy.annett@gmail.com

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THE NOVICE CONSULTANT AND ELECTRONIC MAIL: STRATEGIES FOR AND IMPLEMENTATION OF POLITENESS TECHNIQUES IN DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Professional Communication

by
Nancy Kathleen Annett
May 2007

Accepted by:
Dr. Summer Taylor, Committee Chair
Dr. Sean Williams
Dr. Martin Jacobi
ABSTRACT

Success in today's professional world necessitates balancing a myriad of often competing and conflicting interests. Not only must employees exhibit self-assurance and aptitude, but they also must exhibit appropriate levels of politeness given their organizations' norms and power structures. Electronic mail has become as ubiquitous for business communication as are talking on the telephone and meeting face-to-face. However, the characteristics of e-mail may not allow employees to communicate in the same manner as with more traditional media. Notably, e-mail does not necessarily provide a strong mechanism for employees to balance all components for effective workplace communication, including those which allow for the maintenance and elevation of relationships. Although scholarly work has been conducted to investigate the defining characteristics, employee perception, and use criteria for e-mail in the workplace, little research seems to center on the ways in which e-mail either supports or maligns hierarchical relationships in organizations and whether relationship and organizational factors are considered in concert. Although some scholars have investigated issues of power and politeness in the workplace for subordinate to superior reporting, this investigation typically surrounds speech communication.

This study examines the ways in which both experienced and novice consultants in two different organizational settings think about and use e-mail for communication to superiors. The methods by which novices in the workplace communicate via writing, especially to superiors, present a gap in the literature. This study works to highlight the ways that novices make decisions regarding the
use of e-mail in their messages to superiors. By comparing novice and experienced employee behavior across organizational boundaries, this study yields several findings. First, employees do seem to use particular decision criteria when formulating e-mail messages to managers, including a consideration of the message’s recipient and purpose. Novices seem most attuned to hierarchical levels and to the revision opportunities available through e-mail. Second, organizational context appears to affect the way in which e-mail is used by both novice and experienced employees. The two organizations’ varying lines of business and hierarchical structures led the participants to emphasize certain e-mail attributes over others. And third, study participants across experience levels and organizations have some difficulty in balancing relationship and organizational needs. Each of these major findings, combined with other evidence, suggest that there does not seem to be a similar politeness understanding between sender and recipient in e-mail communication as exists with more traditional speech-based media. Though audience, purpose, and context continue to be the central rhetorical framework for decision criteria concerning e-mail use, the “universal politeness” traditionally claimed in most speech communication does not equally permeate organizational e-mail messages.
DEDICATION

It was only through the backing and devotion of several people that I was able to complete this scholarly work. John and Dorcas Annett, my parents, have always encouraged and roused my drive to succeed. Doug Peters, my fiancé, has patiently and tenderly supported my foray into graduate school, even as I moved 531 miles away. I dedicate this thesis to these three people.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am grateful to the two participant organizations and their members whose thoughts about, feelings toward, and use of electronic mail in the workplace allowed this thesis to exist. In particular, I’d like to thank Roman Iwachiw, David Treworgy, and Christer Johnson for approving and facilitating the collection of data at their respective organizations.

Additionally, it is important that I acknowledge all of the classmates, friends, and acquaintances who freely chatted about their own use of e-mail, noting the good, the bad, and the ugly. It was through informal discussions with these people that many ideas for my scholarly work came to light.

Finally, I would like to thank two people close to my heart. First, I am indebted to my mom for her help in the final stages of proofreading for this document. And second, I am grateful to Doug, my fiancé, not only for amalgamating key information on appropriate statistical procedures for my paper but for his constant encouragement regarding “my stories about e-mail.”
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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

Electronic mail (e-mail) is an asynchronous communication mechanism that includes composing, storing, sending, and receiving messages via electronic communication systems. Although e-mail has existed for decades, during the last ten years it has become a ubiquitous—though nebulous—tool for communication in most organizations, particularly for businesses. A large segment of today’s workforce, from CEOs to fresh-out-of-college new hires, relies on e-mail to transact numerous types of business on a day-to-day basis. Ubiquity, however, does not necessarily constitute effective use. And even the term “effective” for a relatively nascent and evolving medium such as e-mail is difficult to define. Current research, however, points to the fact that many people still have difficulty in selecting useful and appropriate discourse strategies for e-mail messages.

Numerous authors have attempted to provide guidelines for “effective” e-mail use. Much of this literature stresses a prescriptive to-do list of items to check off before hitting the send button. Though this material is somewhat useful, the stronger examples of such literature recognize e-mail as an evolving, socially constructed medium and therefore provide guidelines for facilitating informed choices. Although scholars point to some aspects of e-mail that promote communication—such as the ability to review and revise and the potential of eliminating hierarchical boundaries—the lack of contextual cues often imposes high understanding costs. Assessment of the key elements of a rhetorical situation—audience, purpose, and context—becomes challenging while staring at a computer screen where no physical reminder of the message recipient likely
exists. Consider if the sender, a project quality employee at an engineering firm, considered his audience (or the need to provide sufficient context or signposts) when he wrote this e-mail to a group of mechanical engineers at the firm:

The assigned inspector's due diligence in respect to Client interest is appreciated but would concur that considering the post-installation heat tracing and subsequent mention that primer only is necessary complemented by the Supplier point of quote intention proceed 'as quoted' - will advise the inspector...

At least one message recipient of this e-mail, who was involved in the project being discussed by the sender, indicated that he had no idea what the sender was trying to say. This message uses a blend of formality, jargon, incorrect standard English, and stream-of-consciousness thinking. On their own, such communication attributes may produce negligible consequences; blended together, however, they formed an e-mail communication that was quite difficult to decipher.

Novices in the business world may be seen as a special case when it comes to e-mail use. First, they must work to acclimate themselves to often complex and fast-paced environments with minimal communication training except for their prior coursework and cultural capital. Second, they must figure out how to transact business—correctly, efficiently, and competently—with both colleagues and superiors. And third, they must use numerous communications media—often e-mail—not only to get the work done, but to show they are contributing to the bottom line while also using appropriate politeness strategies. For reporting to superiors in particular, how can politeness be balanced with other (often conflicting) organizational needs in an e-mail, a medium weak in the social cues that inspire displays of politeness? Consider an additional example,
an e-mail sent by a Ph.D. candidate to a graduate school administrator (a relationship perhaps similar to that of superior-subordinate in business):

You did not respond to the email I forwarded [name removed].
Don’t bother responding to this email either, but I think you are smart enough to see what is right in this situation. After I was told I did not need to register for summer hours, I also paid to use the recreation center and am now charged for the fee again in my tuition. They say that this fee is also non refundable. So this is $50 that I am penalized unjustly. I imagine it would be extremely inconvenient for a person in your position to believe in God. Because if there is a God, you will pay this back to me in the afterlife.ii

Had this student been speaking with the administrator face-to-face and not seething into a computer monitor, would his communication have been the same? Clearly, some individuals are simply predisposed to aggressive communication. But it might be that the near-instantaneous response time allowed by e-mail, combined with the absence of a human presence, triggered a more escalated and unfriendly response than was warranted by the situation.

Based on a review of the literature on e-mail, communication theories, and linguistic politeness theories, it appears that there is not a politeness understanding between sender and receiver in the e-mail medium similar to that which exists in conversational speech. Since e-mail bridges face-to-face contact and formal written documents, might it be that politeness tactics need to be re-evaluated for this relatively new medium? This study, using questionnaires, interviews, and real workplace e-mails, attempts to discover the ways in which novice consultants in different types of organizations make decisions regarding
appropriate politeness tactics to use in superior-subordinate reporting. The findings suggest that when using e-mail to communicate with one’s superior, politeness tactics are not an exigent concern for novices or even more experienced consultants, particularly within certain contexts. Rather, organizational concerns, such as demonstrating accuracy and competency, may be more critical. Regardless, by more fully understanding the decision criteria of novices for organizational e-mail use, we may be able to see how academia and business can better prepare novices for dissonant demands in the working world.
CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars and practitioners alike seem to recognize that e-mail messages now pervade workplace communication. In fact, much research has been done to assess the ways in which e-mail is used in organizational settings and has found that the medium is often ill-used and that workers have quite varied opinions concerning how, when, and to what effect the medium is employed. Of these workers, novices present a special case in that they may possess inadequate skills and knowledge to deftly navigate the murky waters of organizational requirements and relationships, particularly via e-mail. E-mail, which appears to be a hybrid of traditional written communication (such as memos and reports) and traditional spoken communication (such as face-to-face conversations and telephone calls), may require workers to determine how they will approach the medium: as a spoken conversation, as a written document, or as something new? A gap in the research seems to exist in examining the ways in which employees—and novices in particular—think about politeness, an ingrained element of spoken conversation, as they compose their e-mail messages. By examining the nature of and user rationale concerning e-mail within the context of traditional theories about politeness and power, this literature review will provide sufficient background to further explore the decision criteria used by novices as they compose e-mail messages to superiors.

During the last 20 years, scholars have been calling for increased research into the social and political dynamic of organizational communication. Even before e-mail use reached its current state of prolificacy, researchers in the
fields of business and professional communication stressed the importance of better understanding such organizational social factors as hierarchies, norms, roles, relationships, and traditions for the composing process in industry (Anson and Forsberg 204; Broadhead and Freed 3). Hagge and Kostelnick comment specifically on the dearth of study about politeness within professional documents as compared to the more common study of politeness within professional speech. They worry that business communication textbooks provide only lip service to—or recommend tightly regimented rules concerning—politeness in organizational communication. In fact, such communication must be variable and attuned to the demands of delicate situations, whether it occurs in a telephone call, memo, or e-mail message. They call for additional focus on politeness strategies and “linguistic diplomacy” in business communication pedagogy and textbooks (Hagge and Kostelnick 331, 334). In addition, Hagge and Kostelnick note that their discourse analysis of auditors’ suggestion letters substantiates the universality and significance of politeness strategies by illustrating their key role in the creation of professional documents (313). Though these authors were writing in a time before e-mail was as prominent as it is today, their message still applies: teaching students about politeness in written workplace communication is important.

More recently, specific calls have been made to examine more closely the ways in which e-mail is used, and how well it is used, in an organizational setting. Some researchers have asked for stylistic and other studies of e-mail that allow the field to understand better how e-mail facilitates communication, how writers compose e-mail, and how e-mail influences recipient thought and action (Dawley and Anthony 198; Rice 20). Ducheneaut and Watts note two gaps in the approximately 30 years of e-mail research: (1) it has failed to produce a unified
set of results and (2) much of the more recent research has looked at e-mail as a social phenomenon with broad organizational implications but has failed to examine how or if e-mail will be used beneficially in organizations (13, 35).

Rogers and Lee-Wong, whose suggestion for reconceptualizing politeness for today’s superior-subordinate reporting greatly influenced many of my key research questions, indicate that although expressions of linguistic politeness help maintain social hierarchies in organizations, “issues of politeness in organizational contexts remain underinvestigated” (380). They even suggest a research application for their politeness framework, noting that demographic data surrounding a study of sender / receiver message effectiveness and politeness (including that found in e-mail messages) might allow one to see if the presence of cultural, gender, or other influences might affect choices for and interpretations of business correspondence (408). Rogers et al. point out that several studies have examined categories of activities of subordinate reporting; yet there still remains a need for additional research into the textual means through which subordinate reporting is enacted (373). Since e-mail has become such a predominant means of workplace communication, it would seem then that an examination of politeness and subordinate reporting within its context has both exigence and merit. As e-mail has made a big difference in numerous organizational facets, including politeness norms, it is vital to understand how this technology continues to shape organizational identity (Eisenberg and Riley 315). In fact, as Van den Hooff et al. aptly suggest, “Given that communication technologies are an integral part of our organizational communication landscape, explaining the extent to which they are used and with what effect is important” (5).
Since e-mail is so widely used in organizational settings, it is critical to work to characterize it and therefore to understand when, where, and how it might be used. As a unique hybrid of various traditional media combined with new, technologically capable features, e-mail presents both benefits and challenges to users. It is necessary to equip practitioners with an appropriate toolkit to reap the benefits and despoil the challenges. Employees now appear to select e-mail for many of their daily communication tasks—but to what effect and with what level of true success? As e-mail may be considered a flattener of social hierarchies, it changes traditional dynamics between low- and high-status individuals. Though it seems that participants in a spoken interaction understand the linguistic rules that surround their exchange—including appropriate elements of politeness—such linguistic rules may not yet exist for e-mail. Politics and power structures in most organizations are a given; yet novices are often ill-prepared to immerse themselves nicely within the ebb and flow of such structures, particularly over e-mail. By closely examining each of these areas, we may be able to determine how novices in the organization make decisions about organizational e-mail use, and we may discover gaps in this decision-making process that necessitate increased training by business and academia alike.

**Characterizing E-mail**

Before going further, it seems necessary to discuss the nature of e-mail, particularly given that practitioners and academics alike still have different assumptions about what e-mail really is. Although I do not purport to be able to provide a singular definition of e-mail, better understanding what Herr terms “conflicting mental models” will prove helpful in framing my study of e-mail decision criteria by novice consultants. Quoting Kiesler and Sproull, Herr says
mental models are the articulation of what is important or unimportant depending on underlying values, shared interests, and common understandings (12). Numerous authors describe e-mail as unique among other channels of communication, yet they have also noted its hybrid nature, incorporating various aspects of other media. This hybrid nature may lead to the “conflicting mental models.” E-mail might be thought of as crossing traditional boundaries of print and electronic media, being part letter, part memo, and part telephone call (Andrews 48; Sullivan 52). Some authors liken e-mail to a conversation, in that even though it is asynchronous, it is characterized by interruptions, delegations, often-fast response time, and shifting participants (Spinuzzi 241; Thomas et al. 278). Friedman and Curall, however, make an important distinction, disassociating e-mail from conversation; they indicate that e-mail is not at all asynchronous (i.e., not truly conversational) but rather a series of intermittent, one-directional comments (1327). They argue that a deficit of contextual cues—stemming from a lack of contemporaneity and sequence—and an inability to time messages and responses impose high understanding costs (Friedman and Curall 1328). Thus, even though scholars often use the same terms to describe e-mail—in this case, “asynchronous”—their interpretation of how these terms are enacted is quite dissimilar. These differing interpretations further the notion that e-mail is currently an ambiguous medium. It is the possibility of near-instantaneous communication, though, that most sets apart e-mail from earlier forms of written communication, such as using a typewriter to compose a memo.

For those who see e-mail as ephemeral, such as Sproull and Kiesler, the stakes of communication may seem smaller. These theorists, who conduct social science research on pioneering changes in organizational communication, postulate that when people feel less committed to and concerned about what
they say, they’ll also be less worried about the social reception that the messages (and thereby they as people) receive (*Connections* 42). Consider the example used earlier, where the graduate student angrily contacted an administrator using e-mail. In order to get what he wanted, this student probably should have considered that he needed the message recipient to view him in a positive manner. Yet, the message tone and content clearly reflect little regard by the student for the way that the administrator would feel about him. On a similar note, people who have grown up using a computer, though they may be positively affected by developing an experiential, bricolage-type mentality toward technology, may become less critical and discerning toward electronic tools such as e-mail and may develop a trivializing or “taken-for-granted” attitude toward communication encountered in an electronic space (*Burbules* 110; *Eisenberg and Riley* 315). Though the focus of this research is e-mail, it might also be interesting to study the ways in which this trivializing attitude might shape the use of other communication technologies, such as the telephone.

Some theorists call attention to the fact that e-mail use can even be asocial. Friedman and Currall argue that e-mail may be seen not only as devoid of social cues, but “profoundly asocial” (1329). As e-mails may often be written in isolation with the writer simply staring at a computer screen, an awareness of a human counterpart is diminished. Thus e-mails are often written and responded to in a context lacking an awareness of human sensibilities (Friedman and Currall 1329). Lynne Truss, known for her popular, witty commentary on the decline of both grammar and politeness in society, paints a picture similar to Friedman and Currall’s. She shows that although electronic communication does provide new and easy-to-access avenues to people and relationships, e-mail communication is just not the same as chatting with your neighbor over the garden fence.
Rather, “It’s people sitting on their own, staring straight ahead, tapping keyboards, often in dim light, surrounded by old coffee cups and plates with crumbs on [sic]” (Truss 83). In essence, there are few reminders in an e-mail (or in the process of composing it) of the recipient and the social context, meaning that cues and controls are weak and users forget about another’s presence and opinions (Garton and Wellman 9). Sproull and Kiesler devote much attention in their book to the lack of social dues that e-mail provides. A paragraph from their chapter, “Do You Know Who You’re Talking To?” elaborates nicely on this point:

Computer-based communication today, like the automobile of yesterday, creates a new social situation. Unlike automobile campsites, which were rich in social cues and shared experience, today’s electronic technology is impoverished in social cues and shared experience. People “talk” with other people, but they do so alone. Reminders of other people and conventions for communicating are weak. Thus in this new forum, messages are likely to display less social awareness. The advantage is that social posturing and sycophancy decline. The disadvantage is that so, too, do politeness and concern for others. (Sproull and Kiesler, Connections 39)

Although these same weaknesses—these same missing cues—may characterize older technologies such as the typewriter, it is important to remember that typewritten notes were not often used in a “conversation-like” fashion as are e-mail messages today.

Despite this negative characterization, e-mail is sometimes praised for one of its seemingly positive characteristics, its flattening ability. Status cues, such as office size, clothing, age, gender, wealth, and composure, which are
readily apparent in face-to-face communication, are diminished in e-mail, thus weakening status-induced imbalances (Garton and Wellman 9; Sproull and Kiesler, *Connections* 42-43). Furthermore, e-mail has been shown to lead to increased amounts of participation from all levels of the organization (including those who are of low status or on the periphery), less centralized leadership, and more egalitarian participation (Ducheneaut and Watts 34; Harris 419).

Social cues and shared experience, two factors critical in establishing the shared ideas of audience and context that necessarily underscore effective communication exchanges, are often missing from e-mail messages. Jessmer and Anderson provide a similar analysis to that of Sproull and Kiesler, implying that, as we become less aware of our audience, we become more secure in our anonymity and thus less bound by social norms, such as politeness (332). Thus it may be that the flattening properties of e-mail, while allowing for more autonomous networking among individuals at every strata of the organization, also dismiss the social cues underscoring the context for politeness that might be required by superiors from subordinates in even the most laissez-faire organization. It is important to keep in mind the positive attributes along with the more detrimental: while perhaps this lack of social cues makes e-mail somewhat ambiguous, the nature of the medium also allows for review and revision (Friedman and Currall 1329; Garton and Wellman 3).

Given this multiplicity of perspectives concerning the nature of e-mail, it does not seem surprising that a growing body of evidence points to the fact that many people may just use themselves as a reference point for “audience” in their communications (Kruger et al. 925). Though egocentrism in e-mail may prove to be a useful heuristic at times, a world with as many diverging perspectives as our own means that overconfidence in or overestimation of one’s message clarity
may in fact reduce the quality of the communication (Kruger et al. 934; Sproull and Kiesler, *Reducing* 1509). Kruger et al. provide a tangible example:

Over e-mail, we know that we are being sarcastic when referring to the comic brilliance of say, Adam Sandler, just as we know that we are not when making the same statement of John Cleese. Note, however, that what is obvious to us may be considerably less so to the person on the other end of the computer. (926)

Just as with traditional prose, Spinuzzi reminds us that writer-centered e-mails tend to be understood by one primary (and perhaps unintended) audience: the writer (215). So, where does this leave the novice in the business world when contemplating how to write his or her e-mail message? Given that so many different mental models exist, how can a person new to an organization navigate the murky waters of e-mail use, mitigating the negative aspects of the tool and playing up the benefits? Might it be that novices require additional education and training concerning e-mail use within their particular organization?

**E-mail: Burgeoning Use with Mixed Results**

Although I have thus far alluded to some problematic features of e-mail, it is also necessary to consider the increased use of this medium. While not a dilemma in itself, increased adoption, coupled with the fact that employees view it as useful, becomes problematic when so many theorists point to the fact that in general much e-mail communication is actually not “effective.” Although statistics regarding actual e-mail use vary widely (anywhere from 35.5 to 60 to 76.8 billion e-mails per day), we can all agree that e-mail use has become quite prevalent (Burgess 71; Dunn; Lane). According to data from the 1990s quoted by Harris, 92% of large corporations use e-mail (4). This number has no doubt grown since
that time to nearly 100% today. Several authors go so far as to say that e-mail is now the fundamental and most frequent means of communicating in the business world, with the volume of e-mail messages even outnumbering the letters delivered by the U.S. Postal Service (Friedman and Currall 1325; Harris 420; Kruger et al. 926; Thomas et al. 253). Some even call it “omnipresent” (Ducheneaut and Watts 12).

Despite the fact that e-mail use is quite widespread, scholars and practitioners alike continue to find problems with common usage patterns. The professional communication and information technology disciplines are replete with articles suggesting heuristics for more effective e-mail use. Some articles provide advice about netiquette or the “rules of e-mail” so that users can avoid career-damaging moves (Casperson; Extejt). Munter et al. remind their audience that “e-mail is work, important work, which requires time and know-how to use effectively” (26). Unfortunately, many people don’t think about e-mail requiring forethought and review, and the result is that recipients either (1) spend extra time attempting to decipher the message or (2) simply ignore the message. In fact, “Research has shown that more than 65% of all email messages fail to give recipients enough information to act upon, and ambiguous poorly written email can lead to misunderstandings that can cause tension within the workplace” (Burgess 72). Although scholars may recommend a rhetorical perspective for e-mail composition (Spinuzzi 215), the rhetorical choices that are made by e-mail composers often are found to be rudimentary, spontaneous, and inattentive to logical frameworks needed by recipients (Rice 5, 7). It seems, then, that organizations are relying on a hybrid, amorphous, quasi-effective communication medium—e-mail—to conduct much of their business. Style manuals, checklists, and even a rhetorical approach may help to create more grammatically and
mechanically sound messages, perhaps enhancing overall dexterity. But with e-mail use on the rise, it is necessary to question not only whether the medium is effective or ineffective but also why workers are selecting e-mail to conduct so much of their business and how effectiveness and politeness may be interrelated as pertains to e-mail.

**Why Select E-mail?**

Understanding why users select e-mail to convey their message is important; it provides a glimpse into their viewpoint on the medium and begins to shed some light on how they attempt to adapt the medium (and indications of politeness) to different situations. Several theoretical stances have been offered to explain the factors that people consider when they select an organizational communication mechanism. Although the media richness model, proposed by Daft and Lengel, has been one of the most accepted theories for the past two decades, theorists now often question the validity of that model for accurately explaining media selection choices. In media richness theory, media are defined as either rich or lean (depending on their level of instant feedback, multiple cues, natural language use, and the personal focus of the medium) and more rich media are intended to be used in more ambiguous situations. Appropriately matching a medium to a task supposedly increases a manager’s overall effectiveness (Miller 270-271). Numerous authors have conducted studies that provide evidence to support the fact that e-mail is often perceived as a richer channel than the media richness model would allow. Rather, socially constructed views within the organization about the appropriateness of e-mail for a task may better predict usage patterns (Dawley and Anthony; Dennis and Kinney; Ducheneaut and Watts; Markus; Turner et al.). Ducheneaut and Watts note that
although e-mail was initially assumed to be a medium with defined properties and predictable outcomes, “…research progressively recognized the malleability of e-mail and this medium is now described more in terms of its local meaning, contingent on how users appropriate it and renegotiate the value of its features in the context of the organization” (30). Similarly, Markus adds, “…the adoption, use, and consequences of media in organizations can be powerfully shaped by social processes such as sponsorship, socialization, and social control, which require social perspectives to understand them” (523). Tied to this social perspective is employee perception. Clearly, it is likely that employee perception is shaped by organizational rules and norms. Both Sullivan and Van den Hooff et al. describe the perceived wide range of applicability and flexibility of e-mail as reasons why it is thought to be so useful (and often selected) within organizational settings (52; 23). So, it may be that employees consider numerous factors when they decide to use e-mail, including organizational standards. Novices, new to organizations, may have less insight into corporate traditions and patterns than would experienced employees. Novices may also have less sagacity surrounding how to balance what expectations concerning their own work output and their attention to relationship needs or politeness.

Several studies and works of research illustrate that people think e-mail enhances efficiency and productivity at work (Dawley and Anthony 179, 192; Markus 520; Sullivan 62). Experienced employees, in particular, may have an even more heightened perception of e-mail usefulness, finding that e-mail supports a variety of task and management activities and is diverse in the ways that it can be used (Dawley and Anthony 193; Ducheneaut and Watts 19). Respondents in a formal survey conducted by Dawley and Anthony stated that e-mail helps them with intra-organizational communication, time management, and
personal efficiency, and they also noted that e-mail correspondence often replaces the need for a face-to-face meeting (192). Also of note is the fact that Dawley and Anthony’s study found that although many employees feel they themselves are productive users of e-mail, they often believe that their peers are misusing the tool (194). So, while individuals believe that their own use of e-mail is productive and proper, they feel that their colleagues abuse the tool. Such an egocentric view may further underscore that most people have a very different way of viewing and using e-mail.

It may be that with e-mail gaining traction as an ingrained communication channel in business, people are beginning to see it as having increased ability to deliver signals most traditionally thought to be available only in face-to-face or telephone conversation. Sproull and Kiesler state that e-mail often is noted as delivering the same message as any other medium, just more rapidly. But this view is misleading because even when the same message is delivered across different media, its true meaning changes depending on the forum within which people assess it (Connections 37). Similar to what the dual-capacity model explains, they are indicating that the e-mail channel itself conveys a certain message. For instance, if e-mail is traditionally used to deliver only rules and regulations in an organization, a user who sends a message via e-mail asking some colleagues to volunteer to work over the weekend to finish a proposal may be seen as requiring them to do so. The medium didn’t match the message, and thus intended meaning may have been distorted. Sitkin and associates note that the medium itself can represent “that which is valued or devalued in a particular setting and reflecting the nonverbal, tacit codes embedded in the organization’s culture” (569-570).
A new theory proposed by Kock, the media naturalness hypothesis, is also worth considering. This theory, based on the evolutionary principles set down by Darwin, suggests that neither media richness nor social theories can completely explain choices for media selection. Rather, it suggests that the human brain is not optimally adapted for current forms of computer-mediated communication because they too often suppress the elements of face-to-face communication on which humans have evolved to rely. (For example, we have 22 facial muscles on each side of the face in order to create thousands of different facial expressions useful in face-to-face communication.) In other words, “our brain has likely been to a large extent hardwired for co-located and synchronous communication employing facial expressions, body language, and speech” (Kock 120). Yet Kock acknowledges that given today’s fast-paced, litigation-happy, globally situated workplace, we should use e-mail to take advantage of its features—such as the abilities to review and record transactions—that are helpful in an evolving business environment. Even if face-to-face communication may be preferred as it is an ingrained aspect of human behavior, certain features of e-mail can also be quite useful in particular circumstances when users simply take the time to capitalize on their advantages.

Perhaps a conflict that Broadhead and Freed found in their analysis of organizational documents and the revision process should also be considered. Though they were not focused on e-mail, these researchers found that business writers in general must balance five norms: cultural, institutional, generic, personal, and situational. Sometimes these norms and demands conflict, and the writer must make choices regarding which areas to address (Broadhead and Freed 10-14). If we acknowledge that organizational media choices are determined by a combination of numerous factors (Miller 276), and we consider
e-mail as an evolving medium, and we think about all of these demands placed on a written communicator, it becomes clear that there’s no singular way to understand the choices that users make when attending to e-mail communication. E-mail, which is more interactive than traditional writing but more permanent than a conversation, still includes many practices that are not yet standardized (Munter et al. 27). This condition as an evolving medium means that e-mail requires more forethought and consideration than are given to traditional media; simply because e-mail has been socialized to be thought of as an effective and productive media choice does not mean that it is in every case.

As a medium that bridges traditional spoken and written communication, e-mail may not necessarily lend itself to all aspects of both media. For instance, although spoken interactions typically include either latent or obvious indications of politeness (such as the use of greetings), few norms seem to exist for inclusions of politeness in e-mail. Thus, given some theorists and practitioners’ views that e-mail does in many ways resemble the “dialogue” of a spoken conversation, one area that requires our attention and analysis is the way in which users consider how (or if) to incorporate measures of politeness into electronic communication exchanges. A review of the literature concerning politeness theories will illustrate that even as an evolving medium, e-mail still has a long way to go before it can be as accommodating to politeness as is face-to-face communication.

**Politeness Theories**

It seems proper to begin a discussion of politeness by reviewing the works of some of the forefathers of the analysis of spoken interaction and pragmatics: H. Paul Grice, John Searle, and Erving Goffman. One may say that
what Aristotle did for rhetoric, these scholars did for politeness within linguistics: setting up a framework for discourse analysis. With their theories considered together, these scholars provide a strong background for understanding linguistic notions of context, face, culture, and status. Grice focused on the cooperative aspect of conversation, suggesting that conversation typically consists of an exchange where the participants have a mutual understanding and common purpose within a situation. Communication is achieved through producing and interpreting evidence. Grice says, “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE” (45). Thus, with spoken conversation, Grice suggests that a number of maxims exist—including “Be polite”—that participants simply adhere to because certain conversational moves are known to be either suitable or unsuitable (45, 47). From Grice’s perspective, conversation should be efficient, truthful, cooperative, and clear. He assumes that with spoken conversation, the sender and receiver hold similar notions of context and agree on what the suitable and unsuitable conversational moves might be.

Searle, who built much of his thinking on Speech Act theory from the work of J.L. Austin, discussed some specific ways in which speakers work to save face and include politeness in spoken conversation. Rather than focusing on cooperation and efficiency (as did Grice), Searle spent much time assessing the propositional content and illocutionary force of communication. He notes that some standard idiomatic expressions keep their literal meanings but also acquire additional conventional uses, as with some polite forms of requests (Searle 48-49). For instance, today, both “Can you do A?” and “Are you able to do A?” likely mean “Will you do A?” Searle stated that speakers often use indirect language
with spoken requests in order to save face and to be polite (49). He also discussed the notion of status and spoken conversation, saying that differences in status influence the illocutionary force of one’s speech. For instance, “If the general asks the private to clean up the room, that is in all likelihood a command or an order. If the private asks the general to clean up the room, that is likely to be a suggestion or proposal or request but not an order or command” (Searle 5).

Goffman discussed the idea of considerateness and how this technique is socialized for spoken conversation. He states,

Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also is he expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings. (Goffman 10)

Goffman also points to the fact that children are socialized into following a system of “practices, conventions, and procedural rules” for spoken interactions within their culture that guide and organize the flow of messages, such as saying “please” and “thank you” (33-34). He notes that most societies around the world have “self-regulating participants” who learn, through ritual, that they have feelings, that those feelings must be protected through the concept of face, and that in spoken interactions they also have pride, honor, dignity, considerateness, tact, and poise (Goffman 44).

This literature, and most of the existing literature concerning politeness, focuses on speech. According to these constructs, when one engages in a face-to-face spoken conversation or even picks up the telephone, the speaker and receiver bring to the communication situation knowledge that specific politeness
indicators will be necessary. Cooperation, politeness, and consideration are simply the norm for spoken conversation (or are at least taught to be the norm through socialization). Yet, if we consider some of the aspects of the framework that these theorists provide—including context, face, culture, and status—it may help us understand the way in which politeness is invoked (or not invoked) in different communication media, particularly e-mail.

Sperber and Wilson, who favor an explanation of communication as a process of encoding and decoding messages (as opposed to Grice’s inferential model), discuss aspects of context, focusing on the degree to which shared beliefs concerning a particular circumstance are evident and accessible. Sperber and Wilson and J.P.M. Austin discuss “conditions” concerning context and the ensuing relevance contained within a communicative speech act: assumptions are most useful and relevant when context is large (easily accessible) and when the effort to make those assumptions within the context is small (125; 106). Given the typical lack of context in an e-mail message, these theorists would seem to suggest that recipient assumptions concerning e-mail message meaning will often be off the mark and that formulating these assumptions will perhaps require more work than the message is worth. E-mail message senders must establish context to remove the guesswork and information processing burden from their recipients.

Brown and Levinson, also researchers of politeness and interaction, provide strong analysis of face, stating that “In general, people cooperate (and assume each other’s cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face” (61). There are some variables, however, which tend to excuse the lack of focus on face needs. One such variable is efficiency, which Brown and Levinson denote as requiring
bald (and perhaps impolite) language. As has already been discussed, research shows that many employees select e-mail because of a perception that it allows for great efficiency. Might it be, then, that in focusing on efficiency, the users of e-mail are reducing their attention to face needs?

When a social situation does arise where one’s face seems to be at risk, knowledge of face attack strategies and mitigation strategies are indispensable. Yet these strategies are not necessarily conscious; rather, it is only when interactional mistakes occur and rules are broken that gaffes of face saving (impoliteness) may become evident (Brown and Levinson 90; Fraser and Nolen 96). Thus, although considering that a communicative context and face needs are imperative in conducting polite discourse, these considerations are practically ingrained into spoken communication interchanges. Per Goffman, “Interpretation of polite utterances to save face, therefore, depends not only on the semantic content of the utterance but also on the accompanying nonverbal cues—vocal, kinesic, and facial—that contextualize the utterance” (qtd. in Ambady et al. 997). Since e-mail typically lacks context, non-verbal cues, and most hints of a face or human audience, it would appear that the foundation of polite communication that is intrinsic to other channels may not inherently exist in the e-mail medium.

Cultural differences must be assessed through the computation of face threat and its potential consequences, given that different cultures have different perceptions of concepts such as intimacy, power, and politeness. Language itself can be used to echo appropriate (or inappropriate) asymmetry in power for some cultures. For instance, Morand notes that in Spanish the familiar “tú” form of “you”, used between people who are intimate, can also be used to talk down to someone with whom you are not on intimate grounds (Dominance 549). Power distance, which is the extent of closeness among members in different levels of
an organizational hierarchy, will also influence the tactics used by message senders and receivers when considering context and face and will vary by culture. In a face-to-face communication instance, for example, a new member of an organizational culture might be able to see that his communication recipient is older and is wearing the dress typical of an executive, leading him to treat the recipient with enhanced deference and respect. Since this same recipient might simply sign his e-mail messages “Bob”, it may be that the signals indicating a difference in organizational hierarchy are missing in e-mail, and thus one may not know that this person expects to be addressed with deference and respect via e-mail. Organizational norms, which will be discussed in more depth shortly, often create a specific workplace culture in which context, face, and status must be considered.

According to J.P.M. Austin, any interaction requires a continual assessment and reassessment of the status of participants, making sure that one appropriately considers their face needs (101). Additionally, face also includes the need for speakers to be fully aware of their standing in a given social situation in relation to other members of the interaction. The situation is critical. Consider an example used by Brown and Levinson: typically, a bank manager has a higher status than a bank teller; but if the bank teller pulls a gun on the manager, the teller has placed himself in a position of higher power in that particular situation (78). Fraser and Nolen add that the terms of the “conversational contract” fall into general terms, which govern all ordinary conversations, and specific terms, which are tied to the particulars of a single conversation:

General terms are those such as the requirements for the hearer to wait his turn, for one individual to speak the same language as
another, that both should speak sufficiently loud to be heard, should speak clearly, and seriously. These general terms are seldom negotiated away, since the success of an interaction rests upon their fulfillment. (94)

If these rules for spoken conversation are necessary and required, shouldn't we assume a similar set—or as least “a set”—of conventions need to accompany e-mail exchanges? Since e-mail also typically involves such acts as turn taking and using a common language, it would follow that at least some of the conventions supporting spoken interactions would apply to e-mail interactions. Taking this idea a step further, it might be that the conventions become even more specific and institutionalized when using e-mail in an organizational setting.

**Politics, Power, and Politeness in Organizations**

Given this background on e-mail use and characteristics and theories on media selection and politeness, it now becomes necessary to consider whether the workplace setting alters how and why people choose e-mail and what effect the organization has on considerations of politeness. Since organizational norms appear to have an affect on why and when employees select e-mail, it may also be that organizational norms influence other decision criteria considered by e-mail composers. Though many people may have difficulty in understanding and operating within the confines of an organizational hierarchy, such behavior may be most difficult for novices. “New hires, particularly those fresh out of school, may have learned little that explicitly equips them for the web of workplace relationships and responsibilities” (Rogers et al. 370). Combined with this ill-preparedness is the fact that novices typically enter the organization on the bottom rung of the hierarchical ladder. Not only are high-status individuals—
superiors—considered to be more vital to group achievement than are low-status individuals, but they also have the power to exert both positive and negative outcomes on these novices (Morand, *Dominance* 548). In tying these statuses to politeness, Morand illustrates that in spoken conversation in an organizational context, the face of a superior has greater worth and ought to be given greater contemplation than the face of a subordinate (*Dominance* 548). We must consider, then, how such face concerns change with e-mail, given that such little context is available to remind senders of their recipients.

Several researchers have examined these types of superior-subordinate relations as germane to workplace writing, and have found that novices often experience anxiety in crafting professional writing directed at a superior (Anson and Forsberg; Artemeva; Brown and Herndl). Interns, who often have status and power analogous to that of novices, have been shown to have difficulty in correcting what they know to be incorrect writing by a superior (Anson and Forsberg 216). Artemeva, who details a case study of a novice engineer in the workplace and the rhetorical decisions that he makes, found that even with adequate training and cultural capital, her novice often had difficulty in voicing his opinion within particular organizational constructs. Even after receiving a promotion, this novice still seems to be viewed—by both himself and his colleagues—as less vital to the organization. He writes, "It is difficult to get your opinion[s] given the proper weight against those coming from more experienced people. However, being prepared and organizing a good document can do wonders" (Artemeva 409).

Brown and Herndl, who conducted an ethnographic study of workplace writing, found that power relations and anxiety stemming from a feeling of powerlessness caused employees to develop problems with their writing (13).
Fear—either real or imagined—about job security, as well as the need to write up the corporate hierarchy caused some employees to feel so much pressure and stress that they seemed to lose control of their writing (Brown and Herndl 15, 18). Clearly, angst related to organizational faux pas and simply fitting in to the organization, which can affect any employee, are particularly adverse for novices’ communication. E-mail, despite its many troubling characteristics, it thought to make organizations more egalitarian. Thus, might the use of e-mail help novices to improve upon their small voice and low-status position? Communication competence in the information age requires an understanding and ability for using e-mail to send and receive messages and to obtain, process, and interpret information at all hierarchical levels (Turner et al. 226). As more and more organizations turn to e-mail for a large percentage of their communication, and as supervisors seem to rate subordinates’ performance on how well they can select the right medium given organizational norms (Turner et al. 241), it could be that e-mail is a channel for novices to further their voice within the organization.

Before answering this question, it is essential to review not just the idea of hierarchy in the organization, but also some related concepts, turning once again to ideas of politeness. Employees, particularly in a situation where they are writing, seem to be guided by at least five different types of norms: cultural, institutional, generic, personal, and situational. These norms influence the specific written product and the writer’s behavior while in the process of composing (Broadhead and Freed 10, 11). These same norms also transform spoken communication situations, and with particular effect in superior-subordinate reporting. Morand, who writes extensively on this topic, contributes some important insights. First, in the spoken superior-subordinate exchange, the role of the subordinate entails a greater demonstration of social distance and
therefore deference (Morand, *Forms* 36). In showing this deference, the subordinate must engage in a ritual, following the boss’s lead in conversation, speaking only in turn at meetings, laughing at the boss’s jokes, and avoiding pointing out any gaffes made by the boss (Morand, *Dominance* 544).

Second, in business, politeness is not just social pleasantry, but polite linguistic tactics are “integral to the elaboration and maintenance of social hierarchies in organizations” (Morand, *Language and Power* 236). Thus, although culture and status are key factors to take into consideration for any polite interchange, they are vital in business. Finally, studies have shown that people seem to make specific—yet not necessarily conscious—decisions regarding politeness tactics when addressing a superior through spoken communication (Morand, *Language and Power* 244). Thus, Morand seems to apply much of the foundational material proposed by Grice, Searle, and Goffman to organizational contexts, implying, just as they do, that in spoken conversation appropriate indications of politeness just *happen* through the course of the dialogue. Broadhead and Freed take this application in a different direction, also discussing the conversational rules proposed by these linguists, yet asserting that the same rules apply to writing situations. They argue that the same dynamic of spoken conversation, which people observe in their everyday speech, is also generalized in everyday writing (Broadhead and Freed 11). If we take one more step, it seems fair to assert that these same indicators of politeness would need to be present in e-mail exchanges as well, and that even novices in an organization should be well attuned to crafting appropriate e-mail messages that take into account hierarchically appropriate considerations of politeness.

Such an implementation is easier said than done, however. Several researchers have found evidence of a dichotomous conflict in the workplace for
novices and their written communication, a conflict where opposing yet obligatory
needs must be addressed. Not only are novices expected to become socialized
into the organization, extending appropriate measures of politeness as they go,
but they are also expected to meet organizational goals by showing that they can
make individual contributions to the organization, or bring to the table the skills
and abilities that earned them the job in the first place (Hagge and Kostelnick;
Katz qtd. in Artemeva; Rogers and Lee-Wong; Rogers et al.). Katz’s study
showed that novice acculturation into an organization has two complementary
but opposite dimensions: organizational socialization (a process whereby the
novice becomes assimilated into the organizational culture) and individualization
(a process whereby the novice attempts to change the organization to meet his
or her personal needs) (qtd. in Artemeva 404). Rogers and Lee-Wong express
similar thoughts on the dichotomy, adding that written organizational
communication also has an expectation for politeness, but that what constitutes
politeness depends on position, power, working relationships, and contact
between writer and reader (384). These scholars investigated this issue in great
detail, developing an organizational politeness framework for written
communication that “suggests that although conventional strategies long
associated with receiver face needs remain critical in subordinate reporting, such
strategies may also need to accommodate obligations concerning self-assertion”
(Rogers and Lee-Wong 406). Ideally, workplace writing addresses the competing
yet complimentary issues in accomplishing such goals present in the two faces of
the dichotomy, such as contribution, ownership, objectivity, and deference
(Rogers et al. 393).

For the novice, then, writing an effective workplace e-mail means not just
considering the rhetorical situation, not just incorporating politeness, but also
illustrating the right balance between relationship and individualistic considerations. Hagge and Kostelnick note that the necessity for this balancing act is under-emphasized in business communication pedagogy. They note that many business communication situations include potential face concerns and therefore require special attention to linguistic politeness strategies to “grease the wheels of human interaction” (Hagge and Kostelnick 331). More than that, though, pedagogy must reconcile interpersonal diplomacy with personal achievement: “Instead of confusing them [students] with blanket, contradictory pronouncements about the need to write ‘clearly and concisely’ but ‘courteously’, textbooks should demonstrate how business writers assess trade-offs between these two by analyzing situational contexts, including power and status differentials…” (Hagge and Kostelnick 335). It is also the role of the manager, however, to help set up an appropriate framework in which such carefully balanced types of interactions can occur. Managers must define for their employees what is expected of them in a given communication situation (Harris 143). Ideally, employers want employees who are well-versed in tactics of social etiquette and politeness, particularly if they are to be dealing with customers or clients. “Employers want people who know how to live in a social world and interact in a business environment” (Harris 168). Perhaps what is most important, then, is teaching students how to become this type of employee.

**Novices and E-mail: Where are we Today?**

Among communication media in general, e-mail is still in its infancy. Though e-mail has existed for decades, “Uncertainties arise from the absence of shared rules and norms. Explicit rules and policies for electronic communication differ from organization to organization” (Sproull and Kiesler, *Connections* 51). In
face-to-face or telephone conversation, social context cues can be used to assess more astutely the communication situation. Many of these cues are missing from e-mail. When context cues are strong, behavior tends to be other-focused, differentiated, and controlled. When those cues are weak, people’s feelings of anonymity tend to produce more self-centered and unregulated behavior (Sproull and Kiesler, *Reduction* 1495). With cue reduction comes cognitive conflict: messages may seem ambiguous when the sender fails to understand the context into which his or her messages are being sent (Burgess 72). The majority of e-mails are often deficient in information, sent with an inadequate subject line, or poorly targeted, sent to a recipient who deemed the message irrelevant (Burgess 76). Though status appreciation seems to be an unconscious aspect of spoken conversation—through such mechanisms as tone of voice, speed, and timing (Fraser and Nolen 98)—such indicators are typically missing in e-mail.

Figuring out how to wield e-mail—which seems to be frequently used but rarely with success—is clearly difficult for any employee in a workplace context. For novices, though, using e-mail becomes doubly difficult when they must navigate through organizational politics and display their personal contributions. What, then, do we know about the ways in which novices currently make decisions about how to engage in workplace writing—including e-mail? What do we know about their decision criteria for addressing potentially competing needs in the organization? For writing in general, Anson and Forsberg found that becoming a successful writer in a workplace context is less about acquiring a set of generic writing skills and more a matter of developing strategies for social and intellectual adaptations to different professional communities (201). In their study of interns, they found that those writers went through three stages when moving
from academic to nonacademic writing: Expectation, Disorientation (may include anxiousness about an implication that the novice is already supposed to know how to do whatever the job requires), and Transition / Resolution (Anson and Forsberg 208). It seems that for these interns workplace writing was, in fact, about balancing numerous objectives in their writing. “Clearly, this complex relationship among writing, social adaptation, and the climate or culture of the community stands at the center of writers’ experiences as they plan, compose, revise, and assess their texts” (Anson and Forsberg 226). Artemeva posed an important and related research question: “Where and how does a novice accumulate rhetorical knowledge of professional genres?” She found that uptake (discussed as the absorption of academic and business knowledge), *kairos*, and cultural capital were all necessary for novices to become successful workplace writers (391). These skills may be important, not only for writing in general, but specifically for writing e-mail messages.

Dawley and Anthony found that novices in the workplace tended to lack confidence in their ability to write strong e-mails (193). Yet if we encouraged novices to rely on their cultural capital, this might allow them to have more confidence in the actions they take and the choices they make in the workplace (Artemeva 402). Brown and Herndl found that novices may also overgeneralize their writing in a new organizational culture (23). If students knew how to use the rhetorical approach that Artemeva says could make them successful with professional genres, they might also avoid overgeneralizing in their e-mail messages. Research found that subordinates who primarily communicate with superiors via e-mail can, over time, begin to forget about the higher social status of the supervisor (Jessmer and Anderson 332). Furthermore, research predicted that low-status individuals in organizations are perceived (particularly by high-
status individuals) to use e-mail too much in place of other communication
media, especially when other forms of communication might have been more
effective (Burgess 77). Burgess found that younger employees had a less critical
view of e-mail as compared to more seasoned employees, as younger
employees tended to indicate that e-mail did not distract them, that message
content was generally actionable, and that few e-mails they received were
irrelevant or untargeted (78). This research suggests that younger employees
have actually been desensitized—perhaps from high levels of both personal and
business use—to responding critically to issues with e-mail messages. In
general, this research seems to indicate that novices, especially, are not able to
make that jump to applying what they know to do in spoken conversation—
considering context, face, status, and culture—and to integrating such
considerations into the workplace e-mails that they write.

It has been established that today’s workplace necessitates the use of e-
mail, yet that medium remains nebulous and often ill-used. It has also been
established that workers, particularly novices, must juggle many different
organizational requirements, including showing appropriate levels of politeness to
superiors in spoken and written conversation and also in balancing relationship
needs with demonstrations of individual contribution in workplace writing. A gap
in the research seems to exist, however, in bringing these two research areas
together. Politeness concerns have traditionally been examined in spoken
conversation, but the research also shows them to be necessary for traditional
workplace writing. As a hybrid of these two traditional communication capacities,
e-mail should also exhibit appropriate attention to politeness. Now that e-mail
communication is a standard in the business world, it is important to understand
the decision-making practices that novices employ for e-mail to successfully (or
perhaps unsuccessfully) balance a multi-dimensional arrangement of reporting requirements and demonstration of personal skills. Should we expect that workers use their understanding of the nuances of spoken conversation or written reports and apply such understanding to the newer e-mail medium? Or do the characteristics of e-mail make it different enough from speaking and traditional writing to merit perhaps a new set of dimensions to spur effectiveness and politeness?
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

Both the current literature and the preliminary results of an informal pilot study suggest that novices in the workplace struggle with effectively balancing needs for politeness and often competing needs for organizational standards. The literature review indicates that it is important to find out how novices are making decisions concerning how they compose their e-mail messages, particularly with reporting to superiors. How can those employees with little real-world experience use e-mail to successfully support their acculturation into the organization both by showcasing their skills and abilities and by maintaining appropriate social dynamics? Given that the characteristics of the often relied-upon e-mail medium seem to prevent successful transmission of ideas, how can novices appropriately use e-mail, especially in the messy hierarchies of today’s organizations? Social factors—including politeness—and their influence on and integration into professional writing remain under-investigated in organizational settings. The consulting industry provides a prime setting for such investigation as that industry may ask novices to wear many hats and to perform work in which they may have little to no specific training. Such gaps in the research have led to the need to answer the following question: When novice consultants in different types of organizational structures communicate via e-mail with their superiors, what are the ways in which they determine and implement an appropriate level of politeness for the situation?

In essence, this study begins to define the politeness decision criteria that novice consultants seem to use when composing e-mail messages to their superiors. By using a combination of questionnaire results, interview responses,
and authentic workplace e-mail messages as data points, not only will this study shed some light on how (or if) novice consultants work to balance varying and discordant requirements within their e-mail messages, but it may also allow us to understand better how training may be used astutely to prepare novices for such demands.

**Pilot Study**

In the Spring of 2006, I conducted research—which became a pilot study for this thesis—as part of the coursework for a research methods class. Completing this pilot study allowed for me to strengthen the methodology used in the final study. Some notable changes were made to the final study. During the pilot study, 21 participants voluntarily completed a Microsoft Word based questionnaire that was similar in design to the current questionnaire being used. However, as the pilot-study questionnaire had to be e-mailed between researcher and participants, anonymity was not possible in all cases. This problem was addressed in the final study. Furthermore, several participants had difficulty in completing certain parts of the pilot-study questionnaire as dictated in the instructions. For the seemingly cumbersome parts, the final instructions were enhanced to provide more usability by the participants. Although the pilot study provided a wealth of information on the ways in which the participants thought about and used e-mail, it was determined that a questionnaire alone did not allow for the collection of enough qualitative data. Thus, additional data collection tools were added to the final study.
**Participant Selection**

For this study, participants were selected from a convenience sample, which is a sample made up of people selected from the population based on easy availability and accessibility. Through prior connections with two different consulting organizations, I was able to obtain permission from their respective management staff to involve their consultants in this study. Although a convenience sample was used, the make-up of the sample, including people with different levels of work experience, people of both genders, people with varying levels of academic training, and people with varying levels of comfort with technology use, make this sample appropriate to the research question at hand. The findings, however, will not be generalizable because of the relatively small sample size. Although non-probability sampling techniques, such as convenience sampling, may be well-suited to certain research goals, MacNealy cautions the researcher to be careful about generalizing beyond the sample (156).

Consultants from two organizations participated in the study. The first organization, which I will hereafter refer to as GlobalTools, is a large, international, information technology organization with employees operating in various capacities, from consulting to computer programming and beyond. Because of its significant size and relatively mature stature in the business world, its operations and communications tend to be fairly bureaucratic and formal. The second organization, which I will hereafter refer to as FinanceUnited, is a small, primarily Washington, DC, based consulting firm specializing in financial modeling for governmental organizations. This organization, which was founded less than one decade ago, tends to celebrate somewhat less bureaucratic and more informal communications (for instance, this organization once held an all-
hands meeting in a bar). Management at both entities agreed to let employees complete questionnaires, participate in interviews, and share authentic workplace e-mail messages. At GlobalTools, two managers distributed the questionnaire to their direct reports (approximately 300 people). At FinanceUnited, one of the partners sent out the questionnaire via e-mail to the entire company (17 people). Of this two-company sampling frame, 96 total employees completed and submitted the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of about 30%. Eighty-four of the participants work at GlobalTools, while 12 of the participants work at FinanceUnited. Of these 96 people, 26 (27%) indicated in the questionnaire that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of these 26 people, 10 (10%) actually scheduled and participated in a telephone interview. Most of the interview participants also shared some of their workplace e-mail messages to be used in the study.

To ensure that this data was collected in an ethical and responsible manner, several precautions were taken. First, this study was approved by the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which deemed the study to have an anticipated benefit that outweighed any minimal risks that might potentially be encountered by participants. Second, each participant was provided with an informational document outlining an overview of the study’s aims, the effort and time required to participate, and an explanation of the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation. Each study participant provided informed consent. Similarly, participants were told that the information they provided would in no way be used by their managers to assess their on-the-job performance. Third, a web-based questionnaire was used that did not require any identifying information to be linked between the data and the participant. Only those participants expressing a desire to engage in the follow-up interview
provided their name and e-mail address. To improve the rate of participation and to reduce attrition, several tactics were used. First, the managers distributing the questionnaire were asked to encourage (though in no way mandate) their employees to participate in the study. Second, in the message accompanying the link to the web-based questionnaire, an appeal to the altruism of potential participants was used, indicating that their assistance would not only enable the completion of a Master’s thesis but also that their participation might lead to new and beneficial knowledge useful in both the academic and business worlds. Third, participation in the study was made as easy as possible; participants simply clicked on a link to an informational page, then on a second link to access the questionnaire. The questionnaire was kept relatively short, and participation was advertised as taking about only 10 minutes. The questionnaire was also developed with an easy-to-use appearance, including much white space and large-scale fonts.

**Data Collection**

Study data was obtained via three mechanisms: questionnaire, interview, and authentic e-mails. The questionnaire was designed to achieve three primary objectives: (1) identify demographic / workplace role characteristics; (2) determine how respondents would actually compose e-mails to superiors in particular settings; and (3) assess the factors that influence the way in which the respondents make decisions about composing e-mail messages. The interview was devised to ask the participants direct questions concerning their e-mail composing processes, particularly focusing on decision criteria. It was also used to ask the respondents about any intriguing or conflicting elements of their questionnaire responses. Finally, the pool of live e-mail messages resulted from
a request made during the interviews. At the close of each interview, I asked participants if they would provide me with some actual e-mails that they had written in a current workplace setting. I asked each participant to provide several e-mails, written either to a colleague (peer) or to a manager/client. I asked that they not select any special or confidential e-mails, but rather to select a few at random. Participants were also asked to provide the context in which the message was sent (e.g., to a peer, to a client, etc.). The live e-mails were collected for comparison purposes with the scenario-based messages, completed as part of the questionnaire, and also to understand better how employees compose messages in a true workplace setting.

The data collection process was designed to help minimize threats to validity. First, in order to minimize the Pygmalion effect (whereby the researchers’ expectations may influence the results) and participation effects, participants were not told exactly what the study’s goals were or what the researcher would be hoping to accomplish; rather, they were told that the study would examine the way in which they used e-mail in an organizational setting. Also, to aid in reliability and to reduce researcher bias, a basic form of inter-rater reliability testing was performed with the data. (See more in the Data Analysis Section.) Second, although a pilot test was conducted using members of one of the participating organizations, every effort was made to select different participants for the final study to avoid any testing or sensitization effects.

**Questionnaire Development**

The web-based questionnaire was developed with three primary goals in mind: (1) gaining demographic information on participants; (2) understanding the ways in which the participants actually wrote e-mails to specific people in specific
situations; and (3) identifying the factors that seemed most important to participants when they composed e-mail messages. The questions for the questionnaire were developed largely based on issues identified in the literature as being relevant to my primary research question. An initial, Microsoft Word based questionnaire was deployed in the pilot study and was completed by about 20 participants. Based on the results of the pilot study, several questions were re-worded for enhanced clarity while others were added to better assess more of the participants’ thoughts and behaviors surrounding the e-mail message composition process. In accordance with MacNealy’s text, *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*, several testing procedures were enacted before the final questionnaire went live. First, a fellow student in the degree program tested the questionnaire and provided feedback. Then, several different people of all ages and backgrounds were asked to complete the questionnaire and to note the time it took them to complete it. Knowing the average time of completion ahead of implementation allows one to include it in the information prefacing the questionnaire (as was done with this study) (MacNealy 171).

The questionnaire (see Appendix 1 to review the entire questionnaire) consisted of three parts: Background Information, Scenario Responses, and Ranking and Likert Questions. In the Background Information section, participants noted information concerning age, level of education, current hierarchical position, length of time in the consulting industry, presence of work in other industries, familiarity with technology, and level of job security, among others. This information allowed analysis to be performed that may connect employees’ background characteristics with certain types of decision-making for e-mail. (For instance, Brown and Herndl found that certain types of writing problems emerged when workers were worried about their job security (17)).
Furthermore, this section is important because it allowed for the differentiation of novice consultants from more experienced consultants. Novice consultants, for the purpose of this study, are those with five or fewer years of experience in the consulting industry. These background questions should have been easy for the respondents to answer, and typically a response rate improves when easy questions precede more difficult questions in a questionnaire.

In the Scenario Response section, respondents composed two e-mail messages within the context of two different scenarios—an e-mail to a manager identifying the existence of errors in a deliverable and another e-mail to a more senior manager requesting a meeting to discuss possibilities for receiving a promotion. This part of the questionnaire builds on previous work completed by Morand and Rogers and Lee-Wong in particular. These sets of authors reviewed oral or written responses, respectively, by low-status or novice employees to superiors in various workplace contexts. A limitation that exists in this type of scenario response is that it is simulated as opposed to true-to-life. Yet, a review of these responses in conjunction with the authentic workplace e-mails submitted by some interview participants provided a strong, varied pool of data for analysis. Examination of these e-mail messages allowed for a better understanding of the behavior and thought that consultants employ when composing e-mails in situations in which they are communicating with a superior.

In the Ranking and Likert Questions Section, participants ranked and evaluated various factors that may influence the way that they write and think about e-mail. To develop the items to be ranked, some factors from literature were referenced. These included such factors as e-mail composers’ considerations for (1) writing an effective e-mail and (2) communicating with a superior in the workplace. The factors focus on what may be termed conflicting
workplace needs (as articulated by Rogers and Lee-Wong) and how (or if) consultants work to balance these needs as they compose e-mail messages. For instance, novice consultants likely would be expected to both “demonstrate a sufficient measure of self-assurance so that their contributions get recognized and yet remain sufficiently beholden to the relational realities of the organizational environment” (Rogers and Lee-Wong 398). Or, as Jessmer and Anderson note, e-mail message senders are seen in a better, more favorable light when their messages are deemed both polite and grammatically correct (343). Or, as Broadhead and Freed found, workplace writing tends to focus more on accuracy and thoroughness and less on conciseness and concerns for audience (153). Examining the way in which consultants rank various attributes (again, in response to the particular scenario of delivering bad news to a superior) that influence their composition process allows for a better understanding of their beliefs about what factors are most important in an e-mail message. The responses to the Likert questions allowed for a more detailed view into the consultants’ general beliefs and attitudes concerning the e-mail medium when communicating with a superior at work. The Likert questions were phrased to assess the degree to which consultants agreed with statements about personal contributions versus relational obligations (per the continuum developed by Rogers and Lee-Wong) and also with statements concerning the similarity of e-mail to other communication media.

**Interview Development**

After conducting the pilot study it was determined that, in addition to a questionnaire, it might be useful to supplement the data collection process with an opt-in interview. The opt-in process allowed those participants who wanted to
participate in an interview to indicate this on their questionnaire. Speaking with the participants via telephone about e-mail allowed for the collection of more detailed, off-the-cuff, and qualitative information concerning their use of and thoughts about e-mail. During the interview process, respondents were also asked to contribute some of their actual workplace e-mails to be analyzed in conjunction with the other information they had provided. Several of the participants electronically forwarded me some real-world e-mail messages to use. See Appendix 2 for a listing of all interview questions.

**Data Analysis**

In general, the analysis of all materials collected for this study was structured to extract and delineate the decision criteria that novice consultants seem to use when composing e-mail messages to their superiors. In particular, the analysis focused on determining if and how novices consider politeness (i.e., concern for others incorporating a consideration of context, face, culture, and status) when thinking about and using e-mail, and how novices balance other organizational needs in e-mail messages with politeness. This section will provide information about how the study worked to enhance reliability and will describe the ways in which the data was analyzed.

Two primary types of data analysis mechanisms were used to interpret the data: reviewing the questionnaire, interview and live e-mail data for general trends and anomalies, and coding each scenario-based and live e-mail message. Because the sample size was small (96 respondents), sophisticated statistical procedures were not necessary. Rather, plotting the data and examining it closely, along with some simple Differences Between Means calculations, allowed for effective analysis. A simple method of inter-rater reliability was also
used. A small percentage (about 5%) of the e-mail messages were randomly selected for inter-rater reliability testing. Using the same coding scheme, three raters coded and evaluated a subset of e-mail messages. Then, for aspects of coding where the level of disagreement was high, discussion ensued such that a type of normalization could occur. With the normalized coding definitions, secondary inter-rater reliability testing was completed on a subset of the messages with approximately 81% agreement. This normalized coding procedure was then used by one rater for the remainder of the e-mail messages in the sample.

Development of Coding Scheme

In order to understand both how respondents think about e-mail and how they actually enact communication through e-mail, different types of codes were selected for this study. The four areas to concentrate on for coding were extracted from four primary academic works, and then each type of code was further honed through (1) analysis of pilot study data and (2) review of linguistic terms and conventions. Different sets of codes were developed for each of the four areas. (See Appendix 3 to review the areas and sets of codes). To perform the coding, the rater took four passes at each e-mail message, examining it for instances of each code in each area in turn. Within each area, a unit of language within the e-mail message (word, phrase, or sentence) was assigned only one code from that area. For instance, a unit of language would not be coded both a “Suggestion” and a “Hint”. However, should it qualify, a unit of language could be coded with multiple codes from different areas. For instance, a unit of language could be coded as both a “Suggestion” and as “Confidence.” Each academic work (and the related coding) was selected because it seemed likely to shed light
on the decision criteria used by novices when composing e-mails for their superiors. Again, see Appendix 3 for the detailed coding parameters and additional explanation.

The first set of codes—threat, suggestion, hint, promise, and direct request—allow for a better understanding of how e-mail message senders balance the need for efficiency and politeness in the type of content they include in their messages. These dimensions, adopted from work by Kellermann and Shea, have traditionally been catalogued in speech act dictionaries as having particular levels of efficiency and politeness. Traditional politeness theory, as proposed by such theorists as Brown and Levinson and Grice, notes that communication should typically be efficient, but that one reason to stray from efficient communication tactics is to incorporate a sufficient indication of politeness in the interaction (Kellermann and Shea 147). “According to politeness theory, efficiency and politeness are in tension, and thus inconsistent and incompatible with each other” (Kellermann and Shea 147). Yet, at the workplace, time is money, and so it seems safe to assume that most workers would be expected to put effort toward communicating—including via e-mail—in an efficient manner. On the other hand, low-status individuals, especially, must show their superiors an appropriate level of politeness, thus straying from efficient communication. In reviewing the e-mails written by study participants and coding for threat, suggestion, hint, promise, and direct request, I am able to analyze how and if the participants work to balance both efficiency and politeness in their messages. Furthermore, this data was compared with the participants’ ranking of similar attributes to confirm if the way that they think about using e-mail is how they actually use it.
The second set of codes—deference, solidarity, non-imposition, confidence, direction, and individuality—characterize the tension that seems to exist in the workplace where novices, in particular, must work to balance an appropriate level of politeness with an exhibition of their skills and abilities. By building on the existing literature about politeness and superior/subordinate reporting and then analyzing the written communication of students, Rogers and Lee-Wong created what they believed to be competing communicative dimensions for subordinate reporting. Their research found that, to be successful in the workplace, novices must “continually negotiate tensions between receiver face needs and expectations for personal performance” (Rogers and Lee-Wong 396). Unlike the first set of codes, these codes focus more on tone (though not exclusively) and less on content. As with the first set of codes, though, examining the data through these codes allowed me to see the ways in which consultants work to balance politeness with organizational obligations. These codes also provided insight into how what the participants actually did in their messages compared to some of their thoughts and attitudes about the competing dimensions.

The third set of codes—greeting and closing—characterize whether people seem to be concerned with themselves or their audience in an e-mail message. Given that reminders of audience are relatively weak in e-mail communication, Sproull and Kiesler found that it would be expected (and was actually the case) that senders would dispense with a greeting and more often focus on a closing in an e-mail message (Reducing 1500). However, the politeness literature reminds us that communicative interactions require an awareness of audience, particularly when that audience is part of a higher-status
group. Goffman notes the following about these beginnings and endings of interactions:

Greetings provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the coparticipation, and, typically, that this relationship involves sufficient suppression of hostility for the participants to temporarily drop their guards and talk.... Farewells sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet. (41)

Thus, coding for the existence of a greeting or closing in the e-mail messages (and evaluating the types of greeting and closings used) will allow for insight into whether the message sender seems to focus on himself or whether he is taking into consideration necessary politeness tactics for the situation.

The final set of codes—grammar—characterizes the degree to which mistakes in spelling, usage, mechanics, and punctuation appeared in the messages. Jessmer and Anderson found that using proper grammar in e-mail messages made the message recipient feel as if the sender had more regard for him (343). In general, written communications in the business world are expected to be correct and precise. Yet, Broadhead and Freed found that, when it came time for revision of written organizational communication, employees did not consider fixing problems with usage to be terribly important. Rice also found that mistakes with spelling, grammar, and punctuation in e-mail messages often impaired the receiver’s ability to easily absorb message content. Thus, by analyzing the degree to which proper grammar is used by the respondents, I was able to see the degree to which they are putting their recipients’ needs first.
For the first three coding areas, I supplemented the definitions of each coding term by referencing various materials that further defined (linguistically) how each term might be found in everyday language. These supplemental resources included a thesis on compliance gaining strategies by Cole, an analysis of understatements and hedges by Hübler, and a semantic dictionary of speech act verbs by Wierzbicka. By consulting such resources, I was able to make clear, distinct definitions for each item within each category of coding. To see all of this analysis, please visit Appendix 3.

Limitations of Coding Parameters

Some limitations with the coding procedure exist and should be mentioned. First, ideally the entire sample of e-mail messages would have been subject to inter-rater reliability testing. However, due to time and resource constraints, such testing was not possible. Second, it is important to note that this coding process inherently contains some level of subjectivity, particularly as relates to this area of study. Fraser and Nolen found that even though speech act dictionaries provide some guidance on the natural politeness or impoliteness of a particular utterance, audience, context, and situation have much to do with how that utterance is interpreted. No sentence is necessarily inherently polite or impolite. Yet, the degree to which the participants (1) abide by the rules of the relationship, (2) enact similar interpretations of each other, and (3) implement common usage patterns for a particular time period contribute to the level of politeness attributed to a conversation (Fraser and Nolen 96-97). Furthermore, other scholars have found that making a specific quantification of linguistic politeness strategies is not an exact science and likely requires multiple types of analysis and explanation (Brown and Levinson; Hagge and Kostelnick). Morand
also notes that in the behavioral sciences it is not uncommon to find a
discrepancy between the espoused and actual values of individuals (*Dominance*
553). Thus, one person’s utterance of seemingly polite discourse or written text
might actually have other intentions. And Rogers and Lee-Wong note of their
own study that whether the workplace writing would be seen as polite and
professional would depend on numerous contextual variables, including the
nature of the superior/subordinate relationship and organizational expectations
(397). Although these limitations do exist, steps were taken—as discussed in
previous sections—to provide a solid and academically sound methodological
approach to investigating this research question.

**Methodological Limitations**

Clearly, few studies are able to address every conceivable aspect of the
research question at hand; new research, in fact, often stems from a desire to
expand upon or enhance the work completed in prior studies. For this thesis
several constraints existed, including limitations to the researcher’s time and
budget. If time and money were plentiful, some changes to the methodology
previously outlined would have taken place to enhance the quality of the
research. First, effort would have been put forth to diminish the artificial nature of
both the procedure to collect the data and the process to interpret the data. If a
sample of real-world e-mail messages could have been collected that were
written in response to similar situations, these messages would no doubt provide
a more honest example of the way in which the participants compose e-mails in a
workplace situation. Although the scenarios used in the questionnaire asked the
participants to act as if they were writing an actual workplace e-mail, there is
clearly no substitute for an authentic situation. Along similar lines, an ideal study
would have used the interpretations of actual e-mail recipients (the superiors) to assess the tactics and language used by the message senders. Though the researcher followed a sound process for coding and then evaluating the e-mail messages, actual recipient feedback would have been invaluable.

Second, the results of the study (outlined further in the Results section) and the analysis of these results (outlined further in the Discussion section and Implications and Conclusions section) indicate that some of the factors that the participants were asked to evaluate might have been inseparable from one another or may have been insufficiently described. Although the e-mail message composition factors put forth for consideration by the participants (such as their own efficiency and being accurate and competent) were extracted from the literature, it was not necessarily foreseeable that the participants would have difficulty differentiating between the factors or distinguishing between when they thought about or implemented one by not another. A longer, more in-depth study could have worked to further disentangle the factors and also to try to extract from the participants (perhaps via more in-depth interviews) how they thought the factors might overlap. For instance, can one be polite in an e-mail message to a superior without also considering a superior's time? Another way that this study could have worked to better understand the participants’ thoughts would have been through the use of a think-aloud protocol. With this procedure, participants would have been asked to compose an e-mail message in the presence of the researcher. The researcher would have asked the participants to talk (out loud) about their thought processes as they composed the e-mail messages. By knowing more about specific patterns of thought employed by the participants within their e-mail composition processes, the study may have been better able to pinpoint the factors considered by the participants or to understand which
factors were, indeed, inseparable. It is important to note, however, that think-
 aloud protocols have been criticized as being unnatural, as many people have
difficulty articulating their thoughts while at the same time performing a task
(MacNealy 208).
CHAPTER 4—RESULTS

Employees new to the workforce appear to encounter challenges with written communication and particularly with sending e-mail messages to superiors. Such issues as security in one’s job, comfort with technology, and time on one’s project might affect the way in which novices and more experienced employees communicate. Furthermore, novices must learn to enact the perfect blend of both showing concern for rules of power and hierarchy and also with demonstrating their own self-assurance. This chapter will detail the results from the questionnaire, interviews, and live e-mail data to shed light on the way that novice and experienced consultants think about and actually use e-mail when corresponding with their superiors. Comparing novices with more seasoned workers and comparing employees in two very different workplace settings will help to characterize (1) the focus that each places on various tactics, language, and conventions in e-mail messages to superiors and (2) the degree to which such usage is balanced among competing workplace dimensions.

Demographics

In order to answer the research question at hand, it is important to consider the pool of data from two different dimensions in particular: comparing employees between the two companies and comparing novices to more seasoned employees. Tables 1 and 2 provide summary demographic data about the participants along these two lines of study. A majority of the participants worked for the larger consulting organization, GlobalTools. Slightly more of the
participants (53%) were experienced (more than five years of experience) as opposed to novice in terms of their time in the consulting industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Finance United</th>
<th>Global Tools</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
<th>Novice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Average</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months on Current Project</td>
<td>Average</td>
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<td>12.1</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Secure</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Comfort</td>
<td>Un-Comfortable</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>12</td>
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</table>

When comparing the demographic profiles of both the two companies and the novice versus experienced consultants, many similarities emerged. This study compares the two companies because the organizational composition of each is different; FinanceUnited is a smaller, more egalitarian organization, while GlobalTools is a very large, more traditional and bureaucratic organization. And novices and experienced employees are compared because the literature
suggests that novices may not necessarily have a mature, appropriate social
presence at work, which may cause them to have difficulty both in
communicating with superiors and perhaps in balancing deferential
communications with other organizational needs.

Table 2, Demographic Profile, Breakdown of Novice and Experienced Consultants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>FinanceUnited</th>
<th>GlobalTools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the whole, little difference seemed to exist among the participants
demographically) along these two lines of comparison. The average participant
age was 35, with the average experienced consultant being 40 and the average
novice being more than a decade less at 29. The most common level of
education was a bachelor’s degree. In total, 53 participants were male and 41
were female (two participants did not indicate their sex). Both companies had
more male participants than female participants. Across the board, the majority
of participants had worked in other industries besides the consulting industry.
Some of the other industries in which the participants worked include the military,
the federal government, retail, finance, information technology, non-profit, and
health care. The average time on one’s current project was slightly less than one
year. This time was similar for both organizations. Most participants were
“Secure” in their employment, and many (29%) were “Very Secure”. Experienced
participants had the most responses of “Very Secure” with 37%. Most
participants were also “Comfortable” or “Highly Comfortable” with technology.
A few notable differences did appear among the lines of comparison, and those are worth noting. In terms of education, though the standard was a bachelor’s degree, the majority of consultants at FinanceUnited and the majority of experienced consultants had master’s degrees. Also, although the numbers of male versus female and experienced versus novice consultants were split nearly equally, there were twice as many experienced male participants versus experienced female participants and slightly more female than male novice participants. Furthermore, though project duration was typically similar, experienced consultants tended to be on their projects on average for about nine more months than the novice consultants. Finally, the participants at FinanceUnited tended to be more comfortable with technology than the participants at GlobalTools, as all FinanceUnited participants indicated that they were “Comfortable” or “Highly Comfortable” with technology. In general, experienced participants were more comfortable with technology than were novice participants.

**E-Mail Attribute Ranking**

Within the questionnaire participants were given a scenario and then asked to rank the factors that they would consider as they composed the message. The scenario stated, “When you write an e-mail message that delivers bad news to a superior, what factors do you consider when you compose the message? What is your ranking of these factors as compared to each other?” This scenario was devised for two reasons. First, according to the literature, it would seem that face-saving and politeness strategies might be quite warranted in such a situation, at least in a traditional face-to-face meeting. Second, this scenario is similar to one of the e-mail response scenarios within the
questionnaire, and thus allowed for a comparison between what the participants stated they would do and what they actually did. The factors to be ranked were as follows:

- Creating a message that is grammatically correct
- Demonstrating competency on the subject matter at hand
- Ensuring that all information included in the message is accurate
- Making efficient use of your superior’s time
- Making efficient use of your time as you write the message
- Signifying an appropriate level of politeness toward your superior

These factors touch upon several considerations for organizational e-mail use and reporting to superiors as discussed in the literature review. Efficient, competent, and accurate behavior is expected in today’s business world by novice and experienced workers alike. People, and in particular experienced employees, often believe that e-mail helps to enhance efficiency and productivity at work. Yet studies have found that much e-mail communication is too ambiguous for recipients to easily decode. Correct grammar is instilled into students from a young age. In fact, proper grammar has been shown to be perceived by recipients as the sender having more regard for them in an e-mail message. In practice, poor grammar, spelling, and usage are often the norm as opposed to the exception in e-mail messages. In a similar contradiction, although efficiency is often the norm at work, the politeness literature notes that one good reason to stray from efficient communication is to include necessary indications of politeness in an exchange. Novices are expected to be polite to their managers and to make good use of their managers’ time; however, the flattening
attributes of e-mail sometimes blur hierarchical boundaries between subordinate and superior.

Of the 96 total participants, 82 completed the ranking section correctly in the questionnaire, so their data only is included here. The participants were asked to rank the attributes from least to most important but could also note that they did not consider one or more of the attributes. As was the case in the pilot study, the participants whose data was used ranked the attributes in the following manner (as shown in Table 3). With the ranking scale that was provided, “1” indicated the most importance on average and “6” indicated the least importance on average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (most important)</td>
<td>Ensuring that all information included in the message is accurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Demonstrating competency on the subject matter at hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Making efficient use of your superior's time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creating a message that is grammatically correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Signifying an appropriate level of politeness toward your superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (least important)</td>
<td>Making efficient use of your time as you write the message</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also useful to view this data by noting the percentage of participants within each category that gave a top ranking to different e-mail attributes. Table 4 provides such detail. Although there was general concurrence concerning the order of the attributes from least to most important, Table 4 shows that there is some clear difference between the attributes that are most important to the different segments. The consultants at FinanceUnited seemed quite concerned with accuracy, as fully three-fourths of them selected that attribute as the most important. These same consultants placed very little importance with making
efficient use of their superior’s and their own time as well as politeness to their superiors. The FinanceUnited consultants also seemed to place more importance on accuracy than did the GlobalTools consultants. Experienced participants ranked accuracy most important two-thirds of the time, quite a bit more than did novice participants. Novice participants, however, more often ranked competency as “Most Important” compared with the experienced participants. Also, novice participants seemed to place additional importance on making good use of their own time; 5% of that group selected making efficient use of their own time as most important, while no experienced consultants made this same designation.

Table 4, E-mail Attribute Ranking for Most Important (Percentage) by Organization and Experience Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Finance United</th>
<th>Global Tools</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
<th>Novice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior’s Time</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Time</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politeness to Superior</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some other analysis on this data also proved interesting. Only two participants ranked politeness to their superior as being the most important attribute that they consider as they compose an e-mail message. Of these two, one participant was the only person to note that he was uncomfortable with technology, and the other participant was one of only six to note that he was not “Very Secure” in his employment at GlobalTools. Six participants noted that grammar was the most important factor to them when composing an e-mail to a
superior. None of these participants was “Very Secure” in their employment status, and two were “Not Very Secure.” All of these participants had worked in other industries as well. Four participants noted that their superior’s time was most important to consider when writing an e-mail; all four of these same participants noted that their time was the least important factor to consider or did not consider it at all. The two individuals who considered making efficient use of their own time most important when composing an e-mail to a superior both seemed to be recent college graduates at GlobalTools.

Between companies and experience levels, there was little differentiation of the spread of the average rankings. Notably, attention to grammar and attention to a superior’s time vacillated between the third and fourth ranking. From a statistical perspective, a calculation of the Differences Between Means found only two types of differences at a high degree of confidence for the median ranking. This calculation showed a statistical difference between the way that experienced consultants and novice consultants ranked accuracy (at a 90% degree of confidence) and making efficient use of a superior’s time (at a 95% degree of confidence). These calculations were conducted at 80 degrees of freedom (which is a measure of the number of independent pieces of information on which the precision of an estimate is based).
Figure 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the spread of the rankings. FinanceUnited consultants had the highest overall ranking of ensuring all information is accurate, and FinanceUnited employees had the lowest overall ranking of making efficient use of one’s own time. Also of note is the fact that 11 participants said they do not consider at all making efficient use of their own time.
when writing a bad news e-mail to a superior. All but one of these participants was a GlobalTools employee (not terribly surprising given that most participants were, in fact, from GlobalTools), seven were experienced employees, seven were women, and all were either “Secure” or “Very Secure” in their current job positions.

**E-Mail Likert Scoring**

In another part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to consider ten different statements concerning their e-mail use when corresponding with a superior at work and then were asked to note their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The statements were selected to gain insight into two different areas: first, to learn the participants’ thoughts about statements tied to Rogers and Lee-Wong’s competing communicative dimensions (relationship needs versus organizational needs), and second to see what the participants thought about some aspects of the e-mail medium that are still up for debate in the literature. The statements that were used along with the rationale for including them are noted below in Table 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>When I compose an e-mail, I use writing that indicates that I know my place within the <em>pecking order</em> of the organization.</td>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>Maps to the Deference dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>When I write an e-mail message, I want my ideas to be available for input.</td>
<td>Non-imposition 1</td>
<td>Maps to the Non-Imposition dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I think it’s important that my e-mail messages not burden others.</td>
<td>Non-imposition 2</td>
<td>Maps to the Non-Imposition dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>My e-mail messages highlight that I’m a team player and that I want to work with others.</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Maps to the Solidarity dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>As I write an e-mail, I always try to ensure that it reflects my confidence.</td>
<td>Confidence 1</td>
<td>Maps to the Confidence dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>My e-mails typically underscore my level of expertise.</td>
<td>Confidence 2</td>
<td>Maps to the Confidence dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>My e-mail messages typically show that I don’t require <em>hand-holding</em> from higher-ups; I can work independently.</td>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>Maps to the Direction dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I think it’s vital that my e-mails reflect my individual contributions to the organization.</td>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Maps to the Individuality dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The fact that a recipient isn’t physically present as I write my e-mail message impacts what I say.</td>
<td>Lack of physical recipient impacts what I say</td>
<td>Question in the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I view e-mail as being similar to a spoken conversation.</td>
<td>E-mail is similar to a spoken conversation</td>
<td>Question in the literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More so in this section as compared to the ranking section of the questionnaire, there was variability among the different lines of comparison (organizations and experience level). In general, the participants felt agreement with most of the statements in Table 5 except for statements 9 and 10. For all of the participants taken together, the highest levels of agreement were registered for being a team player (solidarity) and making ideas available for input (non-imposition). Participants agreed only slightly that the fact that the recipient isn’t present affects what they say in an e-mail message, and participants leaned toward slightly disagreeing that e-mail is similar to a spoken conversation. See
Figure 2 for a graphic representation of the levels of agreement for all participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solidarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Imposition 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Imposition 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individuality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of physical recipient impacts what I say</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail is similar to spoken conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-Imposition 1 refers to making ideas available for input. Non-Imposition 2 refers to not burdening the recipient. Confidence 1 refers to confidence explicitly, while Confidence 2 refers more to showcasing expertise.
Some differences across groups are worth noting for the Likert statements. See Table 6 for detail concerning the average level of agreement by segment, where “1” denotes strong agreement and “6” notes strong disagreement.

For all segments, participants ranked either solidarity or non-imposition (making ideas available for input) first or second, most strongly agreeing with those Likert statements. The experienced consultants also equally agreed with the statements about solidarity and direction. Experienced consultants had more agreement with wanting to display confidence (showcasing experience) than did novice consultants. In fact, novice consultants had more agreement with every one of Rogers and Lee-Wong’s attributes than they did with confidence (showcasing experience). At FinanceUnited, non-imposition (not burdening others) garnered more agreement than it did at GlobalTools. However, at
GlobalTools there was significantly more agreement with working to display confidence (explicitly confidence) than there was at FinanceUnited. With a calculation of Differences Between Means, no statistical difference was found in the agreement of statements by GlobalTools versus FinanceUnited consultants. Several differences were found when comparing experienced to novice consultants. Statistical differences were found for solidarity (at a 90% degree of confidence), confidence/expertise and the fact that the recipient wasn’t physically present affects how one communicates (at a 95% degree of confidence each), and non-imposition/ideas available for input (at a 99% degree of confidence). These calculations were conducted at 90 degrees of freedom.

In comparing the relationship attributes (deference, non-imposition, and solidarity) to the organizational attributes (confidence, direction, and individuality), on average all participants had more agreement with the relationship attributes. The novice participants had the greatest difference between their levels of agreement with overall relationship needs as opposed to organizational needs. Experienced consultants had nearly similar levels of agreement, seemingly having a slightly stronger preference for agreeing with relationship needs as opposed to organizational needs.

**E-mail Scenarios**

In addition to gathering data about the participants’ stated thoughts and feelings about various aspects of e-mail, it was also important to try to determine the way in which the participants would actually use e-mail in the workplace. Such study parallels some of the research conducted by Morand on politeness and speech communication in organizations and by Rogers and Lee-Wong on politeness and written communication in organizations. To that end, participants
were given two scenarios to respond to with an e-mail message: Scenario 1 asked the participants to write an e-mail to a manager that revealed major mistakes in a nearly due deliverable, and Scenario 2 asked the participants to write an e-mail to a senior manager asking for a meeting to discuss receiving a promotion. Although writing an e-mail message as part of a questionnaire is certainly different from writing a true-to-life message, participants were asked to spend as much time on these messages as they likely would during the normal course of business.

As discussed in the methodology section, coding was used on each scenario’s e-mail messages to look for four different types of attributes: the use of polite versus efficient tactics, the fulfillment of relationship versus organizational needs, indications of greeting and closing, and correctness with grammar and usage. The following sections discuss the results for each type of attribute. Refer to Appendix 3 for more detailed information concerning the coding procedure.

**Polite Versus Efficient Tactics**

According to Kellermann and Shea, certain linguistic tactics—threats, promises, hints, suggestions, and direct requests—carry with them certain levels of politeness and efficiency for gaining compliance. They found threats to be mostly impolite but fairly efficient, promises to be fairly polite and fairly efficient, hints to be moderately polite and mostly inefficient, and suggestions to be fairly polite and moderately efficient. Direct requests range from being moderately to fairly polite and from fairly to highly efficient (Kellermann and Shea 154). In general, when examining the e-mail response data provided by all participants, the most commonly used tactics were suggestions and direct requests. Such
tactics were used with about double the frequency of hints. Promises and threats were rarely used with Scenario 1 and were not used at all with Scenario 2. Table 7 provides additional detail concerning the frequency of these tactics for each e-mail scenario response for the entire population of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Average # per Message</th>
<th>Most used in single message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Impolite, fairly efficient</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promises</td>
<td>Fairly polite, fairly efficient</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hints</td>
<td>Moderately polite, inefficient</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>Fairly polite, moderately efficient</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Requests</td>
<td>Moderately-fairly polite, fairly-highly efficient</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Scenario 2** |                                           |                       |                            |
| Threats      | Impolite, fairly efficient                | 0                     | 0                          |
| Promises     | Fairly polite, fairly efficient            | 0                     | 0                          |
| Hints        | Moderately polite, inefficient            | 0.48                  | 3                          |
| Suggestions  | Fairly polite, moderately efficient        | 1.09                  | 3                          |
| Direct Requests | Moderately-fairly polite, fairly-highly efficient | 0.87                  | 3                          |

For both scenarios across participants, suggestions and direct requests were found in nearly every message. Threats were found in seven different Scenario 1 messages. The participants who wrote these messages were nearly all men (six out of seven), were mainly experienced consultants, and had master’s degrees. Promises were found in only two different Scenario 1 messages. The participants who wrote these messages were both men and both had master’s degrees. However, one was very secure in his employment status while the other, who actually included two promises in his message, was not very secure in his employment status. These promises included, “Don’t worry, they
can be fixed and I’ll take responsibility for it” and “we’ll get this taken care of well before it’s time to turn the Deliverable in.” For both scenarios, hints were found nearly 50% of the time, or in about every other message. Eight participants, all novices and mainly GlobalTools employees, used hints in both scenarios. In comparing the two participant organizations, the participants at FinanceUnited seemed more prone to use suggestions and direct requests for both scenarios than were participants at GlobalTools, while GlobalTools participants used more hints. Novice participants used hints more than three times as much as experienced employees for Scenario 1. See Appendix 3 for some additional examples of these linguistic tactics.

Focus on Relationship Needs and Politeness versus Organizational Needs

In the workplace, all employees, but novices in particular, may struggle with figuring out how to illustrate their contributions to the organization while at the same time maintaining relationships, especially when communicating with superiors. Morand, in his study of workplace speech communication between superiors and subordinates, found that subordinates make a conscious effort not to offend or infringe upon those people upon whom they are dependent (managers), as power relations imply dependency (Language and Power 240). Rogers and Lee-Wong also acknowledge that subordinates must enact appropriate levels of politeness when communicating with higher-level staff; yet they also determined that superiors expect subordinates to communicate with some degree of self-assurance, for as employees of the organization they are being paid to deliver their insight and expertise (386). In coding for three relationship needs (deference, non-imposition, and solidarity) and three organizational needs (confidence, direction, and individuality), the goal was to
see if and to what degree the participants worked to balance such needs in their e-mail communications, helping to expose the decision criteria used by the novice consultants in particular as they compose e-mails to their superiors.

The degrees to which the participants implemented different levels of politeness and self-assurance depended upon the e-mail scenario being reviewed. For Scenario 1, where the goal was to inform a manager about several major errors in a client deliverable due the next day, participants on average used a near equal number of communications that were focused on relationship needs as on organizational needs. For Scenario 2, however, where the goal was to set up a meeting with a more senior manager to discuss details surrounding a possible promotion, participants on average used twice as many communications that were focused on relationship needs as organizational needs. In Table 8, summary information concerning all participants and their use of language connoting either relationship needs (politeness) or organizational needs is provided. When the average tactic use per message is examined by comparing organizations and experience levels, some differentiation emerges. See Table 9 for additional detail.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Average # per Message</th>
<th>Most used in single message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>Illustrating awareness of power differential</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-imposition</td>
<td>Lessening burden, giving alternative</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Showing commitment to teamwork</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.18</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Conscious focus on personal expertise</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>Indication of ability to work independently</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Focus on personal versus team contribution</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.10</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>Illustrating awareness of power differential</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-imposition</td>
<td>Lessening burden, giving alternative</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Showing commitment to teamwork</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.30</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Conscious focus on personal expertise</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>Indication of ability to work independently</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Focus on personal versus team contribution</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1.12</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9, Relationship versus Organizational Needs, Average Times Used Per Message, By Participant Segment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>FinanceUnited</th>
<th>GlobalTools</th>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-imposition</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Relationship</td>
<td><strong>2.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.21</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.37</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.02</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Organization</td>
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<td><strong>2.09</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.14</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.06</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
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<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-imposition</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
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<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Relationship</td>
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<td><strong>2.29</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.41</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.20</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Organization</td>
<td><strong>0.91</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.15</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.20</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.06</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the coded e-mail scenario data is viewed collectively, the total emphasis placed on relationship needs as opposed to organizational needs is greater in both scenarios. However, some segments of the population focused more on organizational needs than relationship needs. For Scenario 1, indications of deference and solidarity were high for each segment except for FinanceUnited, where indications of deference occurred in only every other message on average. Given the more egalitarian nature of communication at FinanceUnited, a vastly smaller company compared to GlobalTools, this may not be surprising. For this same scenario, indications of direction were fairly high for both FinanceUnited participants and novices. Individuality was also high, occurring in nearly every message, except for at FinanceUnited, where it
occurred somewhat more than in every other message. In this scenario, more emphasis was placed on relationship needs overall by GlobalTools and novice participants, while FinanceUnited participants and experienced participants tended to focus slightly more on organizational needs. (Remember that about 50% of the novices work for GlobalTools and 50% for FinanceUnited.) For the FinanceUnited consultants who leaned toward including comparatively greater indications of self-assurance in their messages, all ranked showing accuracy first and showing competency second in the section of the questionnaire where participants were asked to rank factors that they felt important to consider when sending the boss a bad news type e-mail.

For Scenario 2, a greater focus on relationship and politeness needs was quite evident. For each segment, there were at least twice as many indications of relationship needs as there were indications of self-assurance. For FinanceUnited participants, there were nearly three times as many indications of mainly deference and non-imposition as there were of organizational needs. The following message by an experienced FinanceUnited employee, though it lacked a greeting and closing and contained two grammar mistakes, was high on indicators of deference:

Subject: Professional Develop Meeting

I would like to set up a time to meet with to discuss my career development with FinanceUnited. As you know, I have been here for about a year working on the same project and I would like to explore the possibilities of taking on more responsibility and performing different roles within the company. Please let me know what day and time would work best for you.
This consultant shows indications of deference in several ways. The qualifier “As you know” helps to illustrate that the subordinate is aware of the fact that the superior has just as much if not more knowledge than he does. Also, by suggesting that they “explore the possibilities,” this consultant works to avoid presumption that he will indeed receive a promotion, again supporting the fact that he recognizes the power difference at hand. Finally, using “please” further underscores a deferential tone.

GlobalTools and novice consultants still included indications of solidarity in nearly every other message on average. The participants across segments rarely worked to show confidence or direction in this scenario, though suggestions of individuality, such as “During my review of the deliverable” or “I would like to discuss my options for additional responsibility” did appear regularly as well.

When comparing the way in which men and women implemented relationship and politeness needs across the two scenarios, interesting results were found. See Table 10, which notes the percentages of men and women who used each tactic at least once for each scenario, for additional detail. Within Scenario 1, women seemed to have a greater focus on including non-imposition and solidarity, whereas men had a somewhat greater focus on including deference and confidence. With Scenario 2, women were much more likely to include deference and confidence, while men noted far more direction. Women included almost no instances of direction for this scenario. On the whole, there did not seem to be any striking connection between the way in which consultants implemented relationship and organizational needs and other demographic factors, such as comfort with technology or job security.
## Table 10, Relationship versus Organizational Needs, Percentages by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Women Scenario 1</th>
<th>Men Scenario 1</th>
<th>Women Scenario 2</th>
<th>Men Scenario 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-imposition</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Focus on Greeting and Closing

In traditional spoken conversation, the use of both salutations and closing remarks is the norm. In e-mail, however, no such norm seems to exist. The literature suggests that because users of e-mail often lose sight of their recipients because a physical reminder of the recipient is missing, it might be more likely that users would focus more on a closing and less on a greeting. However, the results of this study were just the opposite. For both scenarios, participants were more likely to use a greeting than a closing (such as “Thanks” or “Regards”). Greetings were found on average in seven out of ten messages for Scenario 1. Novices were the most likely users of greetings, implementing them eight out of ten times on average. For Scenario 2, greetings were found on average more than eight times out of ten. Novices, again, were the most likely users of greetings in this scenario, implementing them nine out of ten times on average. Closings were used about half of the time in Scenario 1 and close to seven out of ten times on average for Scenario 2. A closing of “Thanks” was much more common than a closing of “Regards” for all participants. Participants at FinanceUnited were the most likely to include some type of closing in their “message to the boss” about a promotion.
Focus on Correct Grammar and Usage

The literature suggests that employees may not always concentrate on using correct written English in the workplace when faced with other concerns, such as accuracy of information. For e-mail in particular, abuse of standard English is a common practice, and studies have shown that the recipient is less likely to see the sender as concerned about him when many mistakes in grammar occur. For Scenario 1, egregious mistakes in grammar, such as “recommendation in deliverables” or “We shouldn’t overstate our case” instead of “our case”, occurred on average in about every other message, while that number was slightly higher for Scenario 2. The notable difference among the segments was with the FinanceUnited participants, where mistakes in grammar occurred less often, in approximately one out of three e-mails on average for both scenarios. Participants made about the same number of total grammar mistakes in both scenarios, though the total number that occurred was slightly higher in Scenario 2. The largest number of grammar errors counted in one message was 10. Although this message was somewhat longer than the average message (at 172 words), 6% of the words contained mistakes.

Participant Interviews

In order to obtain additional qualitative insight into the way that the participants thought about and indicated that they would use e-mail in a workplace setting, 10 opt-in interviews were completed with participants. All participants who agreed to be interviewed (26 participants) received an e-mail requesting that they set up a time for this activity; 10 participants followed through and engaged in the interview. Six interviews were completed with employees of GlobalTools (two novices and four experienced consultants) and
four interviews with employees of FinanceUnited (three novices and one experienced consultant). The interview questions (see Appendix 2 for the exact questions) focused on probing the participants about their thoughts, feelings, and usage patterns concerning e-mail, particularly as compared to more traditional communication media. Questions also elicited information concerning the specific situations where the participants would use e-mail, the factors that they think about as they write messages, the ways that messages might be altered depending on the status of the recipient, and the modes by which social cues and politeness were considered in the e-mail composition process.

To begin, participants were asked to detail what they liked and disliked about e-mail as compared to spoken conversation. Five participants, including both novice and experienced participants, indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to proofread their messages and thought it was important to review and revise e-mail messages. Such information is consistent with the research of Friedman and Currall and Garton and Wellman. On a similar note, three participants indicated that they liked the convenience of e-mail in that they could respond to such communications on their own time. Four participants noted that they liked to use e-mail as a written record or reference, either to document important transactions or simply to provide or refer back to complex instructions. Other aspects of e-mail that the interviewees liked were that it can reach multiple people at once, it can be brief and to-the-point, thus “avoiding social pleasantries”, and it can provide a feeling of enhanced productivity consistent with Dawley and Anthony's findings. These scholars note, “Employees view e-mail as a tool that assists intraorganizational communication, time management, and personal efficiency” (192).
The most common complaint (by five participants) about e-mail is that the medium does not contain any indication of tone or context, making some messages difficult to decipher. This detriment to e-mail has been noted by numerous scholars as well, including Fraser and Nolen and Sproull and Kiesler. Several participants pointed out the fact that they thought e-mail was used too often or improperly by their colleagues, either to “write novels,” to become entangled in an unnecessarily “back and forth” exchange, or to pawn off tasks on others. One participant noted that she felt, with so many e-mails being sent every day, it’s easy for an important message to be overlooked in one’s inbox. Similarly, another consultant thought that he had become “too accessible” and “over-dependent” on using e-mail to carry out his work.

Secondly, participants were asked to divulge whether they were more comfortable using e-mail or more traditional communication media (face-to-face or telephone) at work. The responses were nearly split down the middle, with four participants noting more comfort with traditional media, five with e-mail, and one participant who noted it would depend on the particular situation. Those who indicated greater comfort with traditional media mentioned that it allowed them to get across a point more quickly or that it allowed for tone of voice and other verbal indicators. A novice at GlobalTools noted, “I really think tone of voice and intonation—which make up more than 50% or more of what you’re saying—really help.” Those who indicated greater comfort with e-mail typically spoke of the ability it gave them to plan out and edit what they would communicate. Interestingly, three of the four FinanceUnited interviewees had more comfort with e-mail, perhaps indicating that the abilities to review and revise are most appreciated in that organization. Third, and on a related note, interviewees were asked if there were particular situations where they would specifically select face-
to-face or telephone conversation or would select e-mail. Generally, spoken conversation was selected for sensitive, personal, or off-the-record communications, when a response was needed quickly, if a communication or response was likely to be complex or in-depth, or if a personal touch was desired. For example, an experienced consultant at FinanceUnited indicated “If something needed to be very private I would use face-to-face because I know that my bosses have the right to read all of my e-mail communications.” Also, a novice at FinanceUnited noted she would use telephone conversation “if I have a question that might merit a complicated response—such as the methodology of a model.” Conversely, e-mail was selected for situations where documentation was specifically required, if communications were brief, low-priority, and uncomplicated, or if the sender wanted the recipient (say, senior managers) to be able to respond on their own time. Thus, it seems that for relationship tasks, a more traditional method of communication is often preferred, whereas for organizational tasks, e-mail is often selected.

Fourth, interviewees were asked to consider the factors they think about as they compose e-mail messages. The factor most mentioned by the interviewees, both novices and experienced consultants, was keeping the message short and to the point. Each of the following factors was noted by at least three different interviewees: considering the objective of the communication (including action items); ensuring proper use of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure; considering the audience and applying an appropriate level of formality and tone; and ensuring that the message was accurate. Typically, it seemed that considerations of audience and formality went hand-in-hand—a different, more formal tone was appropriate for managers, whereas colleagues could receive less formal, even “sloppy” messages. An experienced consultant at GlobalTools
stated of politeness as a factor, “it goes without saying. It needs no special
consideration because it’s just something you must do with e-mail.” Accuracy
was noted as a top priority by three interviewees. Other types of considerations
of audience were also mentioned, such as using formatting to make the message
most accessible and also considering the complete distribution list for the
message. Other factors mentioned included illustrating competency and
thoroughness, using an appropriate salutation or greeting, and determining
where writing the e-mail falls within one’s own general list of priorities. Using an
“appropriate salutation” seemed to mean adding a higher level of formality in
messages to clients or senior managers. A novice at GlobalTools noted, “My
manager and client always get more formal greetings, at least ‘hello’, even with a
short ‘nothing note.’”

Most interviewees also indicated that, when writing an e-mail message to
a client or manager as opposed to a peer, they would either slightly or
dramatically alter the way in which they composed the message. The most-
mentioned aspects of the message that the consultants said they would change
were as follows: conducting more editing and re-reading of the message; paying
more attention to style; being more concise overall; including a more formal
greeting and sign-off; and being more guarded and tempered in their message
content. A novice at GlobalTools stated that he is more concise in messages to a
manager or client, saying

The goal is to make it easier for them, and if questions haven’t
been answered to provide another channel on which the manager
or client can reach him. And, I will sign it differently than with a
peer, using something like “respectfully yours” or “regards.” With a
peer I’m to the point but not necessarily trying so hard.
In general, the respondents indicated that they would be more formal with managers than colleagues, avoiding free-flowing messages, acronyms and slang, and jokes or sarcasm. And an experienced consultant at FinanceUnited indicated that he would try to focus on things that he had personally accomplished when communicating with his managers. Despite some similarity in the way these interviewees developed e-mails for clients and managers, all indicated that no formal guidelines existed—to their knowledge—for organizational e-mail use at either company. One experienced consultant at GlobalTools noted, however, that she has made it her own personal mission to try to acclimate new hires in the organization on the proper use of e-mail. One experienced consultant at FinanceUnited indicated that he believed that the employees at his firm all had a general understanding of what was important for client-based e-mails, namely the use of common sense and a focus on accuracy and conciseness. Yet two novices at FinanceUnited indicated that they knew of no standards for e-mail use, though they indicated that very specific formats for both memos and reports had been stressed repeatedly.

Given that the literature stresses the fact that e-mail is so weak in social cues (which may become problematic), interviewees were asked if they considered such a dearth of social cues when composing e-mail messages at work. Eight out of ten participants indicated that they did think about this issue. The ways in which the eight interviewees adapted their messages based on this issue varied widely, however, ranging from small considerations to more extreme measures. Some participants indicated that they worked to be more formal and provide additional background when they were unsure of the status and position of the message recipient. One novice FinanceUnited employee indicated, “For a client I don’t know, I would go out of my way to try and find out more about that
person and his or her status within the client organization before sending a message.” And two experienced consultants debated heavily whether or not emotional or joking content was appropriate for a message, with one of these participants indicating that he might go so far as to erase entire messages and begin again because he wasn't sure that certain jokes would be understood.

These participants were also asked if it was important to them to include suggestions of politeness in e-mail messages, and if it was more or less important than compared to more traditional communication. Nearly all of the interviewees indicated that working to include politeness in their workplace e-mails was more important, and most said it was more important for e-mail as opposed to other media, particularly because of the lack of social cues and because e-mail is a written record. A veteran employee at GlobalTools noted of politeness, “It is very important. I expect courtesy from others, and try to infuse my e-mails with courtesy so I get it in return.” Some of the participants didn't think politeness should be a major factor in e-mail, primarily because the point of e-mail was to be short and concise. In fact, a novice at FinanceUnited who worked to avoid “back-and-forth” in her correspondence even tried to make her e-mails “a bit sterile.” One astute novice chimed in with “there is a fine line between kissing up and being respectful.” However, a different novice noted that she had become so accustomed to communicating via e-mail that she sometimes had to make a conscious effort to include her “pleases” and “thank-yous” in spoken conversation. The more experienced consultants among the interviewees were asked if they felt they often received rude or impolite e-mail messages from their subordinates. Most of these people indicated that they sometimes received not rude, but “not overly polite,” messages from subordinates. Such lack of politeness might include a “breach in certain norms and protocols,” a lack of
excessive niceties, or simply overall terseness. Some of the superiors found this to be discomforting, but most let it slide, either because they felt the sender didn’t understand that they were being at least partially impolite, or because the important thing at work is not politeness but simply getting the work done.

**Actual Workplace E-mails**

As noted previously, interview participants were asked to share (via electronic forwarding) a few e-mails that they had written at work. These e-mails were collected to provide additional insight into the way that the participants truly use e-mail in an organizational setting. Twelve total e-mails were shared by participants. Table 11 provides additional summary-level information about these messages. Messages were catalogued as “Short” when they were just a few sentences long or shorter, “Medium” when they were one or two paragraphs, and “Long” when they contained more than two paragraphs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Sender Org.</th>
<th>Sender Experience</th>
<th>E-mail Type</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Recipient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Manager / Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Manager / Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Manager / Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>FinanceUnited</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Request</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Manager / Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Request</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Manager / Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>GlobalTools</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Subordinate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given that these messages do not necessarily fit within the same context as the questionnaire-based scenario response e-mails, they were not coded in the same manner. However, even without detailed coding some trends emerged. First, although the participants were simply asked to pick some e-mails at random, they seemed to select e-mails that they felt were indicative of the characteristics of e-mail that they spoke with me about. For instance, an experienced FinanceUnited consultant who stated that it was important for e-mails to be short and to the point forwarded me three such messages. Similarly, a novice GlobalTools employee who praised the benefits of formatting capabilities within e-mail sent me a bulleted-list type message. Thus, it is likely that this sample is not, in fact, random. An alternative explanation might be that the interviewees could have been particularly perceptive concerning certain aspects of their own e-mail messages.

Second, nine of the 12 messages included both greetings and closings, and the remaining three at least included an addressee and sender name. However, the greetings and closings in e-mails being sent to managers or clients did not seem to be any more formal than those in messages being sent to peers. Although many of the interview participants indicated that they worked to use more formal salutations in messages to higher-status individuals, the sample did not reflect this trait. It may be that the participants overestimated their level of formality with superiors or that the sample at hand simply did not accurately reflect such formality. And third, each of the longer messages seemed to use some degree of formatting—including indentation, bullets, or numbering—to make information more easily accessible to the recipient. So, even though these messages were not “concise” in a typical sense, conciseness being a key
attribute that most of the participants highlighted as being important, the senders seemed to be attuned to using available means to make even long messages more easily absorbed. These real-world e-mail messages will be referred to periodically in the Discussion section of this paper, particularly to further underscore some of the trends or anomalies found in the Results.
CHAPTER 5—DISCUSSION

An analysis of the results of this study—tempered with the scholarship reviewed from the literature—provides an interesting look into the way that the participants think about and use e-mail in an organizational setting. Though the results seem to corroborate some findings from the literature, the results also bring to light new issues, questions, and potential areas of study. Furthermore, the results suggest that novice consultants do seem to use particular decision criteria when deciding to use and when composing e-mail messages in an organizational setting. Different organizational environments may also play a role in the way that e-mail is used by both novice and more experienced consultants. Though it appears that audience, purpose, and context, do, indeed, play a role in shaping e-mail composition behavior at work, they may compel different decision making for e-mail compared to more traditional media. In particular, there does not seem to be a similar “politeness understanding” between e-mail sender and receiver as between the participants in a communication exchange with a more well established channel. The decision criteria used by novice employees when writing e-mail messages to a superior reflect a stronger tendency to address organizational needs (such as brevity, accuracy, and competency) as opposed to relationship needs; however, the selection of e-mail itself may symbolically attend to concerns for the face needs of a higher-status audience.

Factors Considered Important for E-mail Use

Given that few standards seem to exist concerning organizational e-mail use, it was imperative to determine the factors that the participants considered
most and least important when sending an e-mail to a superior. The factors reported as most important by the participants—across organizations and experience levels—were clearly accuracy and competency. At FinanceUnited, 91.7% of the participants stated that accuracy or competency were the most important factors to consider when writing an e-mail to a superior. At GlobalTools, 80% of the participants gave the same “Most Important” ranking to either accuracy or competency. For FinanceUnited, it seems fair to surmise that a focus on these factors stems from two characteristics of that company: its line of work and fledgling age. Since the prime job at FinanceUnited is building financial models, sending detailed and correct instructions concerning financial transactions would likely be very important. Also, given the relatively young age of the company (it’s been around for just a few years), it would seem that its members are still working to establish credibility with not only superiors, but also clients (who might be considered higher status individuals like superiors). When a company can’t afford to make mistakes, it seems reasonable that accuracy and competency would be critical. Though the GlobalTools participants also ranked accuracy and competency first in importance a high percentage of the time, some of those employees also ranked as most important each of the other four factors that were available for ranking (making efficient use of their own or their superior’s time, showing politeness to a superior, and implementing correct grammar). GlobalTools, which casts its net into a wide variety of consulting engagements and has existed for decades, may not require such an elevated concern for correctness in e-mail. But GlobalTools certainly has one thing that FinanceUnited does not: bureaucracy. Having more bureaucracy might explain a greater focus on relationship and efficiency needs. Some classic tenets of bureaucracy—including a clearly defined hierarchy, a regimented division of
labor, and a focus on authority, power, and discipline (Miller 12)—could explain
the need for an enhanced level of attention to factors such as politeness and
efficiency.

Statistically speaking, experienced consultants reported feeling more
importance about being accurate in an e-mail than did novice consultants. In
turn, novice consultants reported more focus on the importance of competency
and an efficient use of their own time. Perhaps experienced consultants, being
more comfortable in their jobs, figure that accuracy is important while efficiency is
not a concern because they are accustomed to completing the work that they
need to complete. Yet, for novices, who may be uncomfortable in their role in the
workforce, additional factors would be highly important, especially illustrating that
they are competent members of the organization.

Across all segments, the lowest overall ranking of importance in writing
an e-mail to a superior was efficient use of one’s own time. On its face, this might
seem to be a strange finding, particularly considering the results of previous
studies. Several studies and works of research demonstrated that people think e-
mail enhances efficiency and productivity at work (Dawley and Anthony 179, 192;
Markus 520; Sullivan 62), and that experienced employees have the most
heightened view that e-mail allows them to operate efficiently (Dawley and
Anthony 193; Ducheneaut and Watts 19). But it may simply be that factors
besides efficiency are more important to employees rather than that efficiency is
unimportant. Or, it might be that novices spend much time on a particular
communication because they want to appear “efficient.” In addition to accuracy
and competency, several participant interviews revealed that conciseness was
also a very desirable e-mail attribute, particularly when sending e-mail messages
to higher-status individuals. It seems quite plausible that it would take time to
write an e-mail that is correct, illustrates one’s competency, and does all of this in a concise manner. Furthermore, several participant interviews also highlighted the importance of the revision and review capabilities of e-mail—noted by Friedman and Currall as some of the most attractive benefits of e-mail—and revealed that many participants often wrote, read, and edited their e-mail messages up to several times before sending them. This process, too, would take time and might seem more important than just working efficiently. Although experienced consultants had a lower overall ranking for efficient use of one’s time when writing an e-mail than did novice consultants, it is interesting to note that 78% of novices aged 25 or younger gave this factor the lowest ranking or didn’t consider it at all. Another influence to acknowledge might be the idea of multi-tasking. The younger generation, in particular, grew up using numerous technologies—often simultaneously—and may simply consider themselves to be efficient at all times, dismissing a special consideration of efficiency for e-mail. They may think nothing of composing an e-mail while at the same time typing an instant message and talking on the telephone. Not considering a high level of efficiency while completing such tasks may be congruent with the “trivializing” attitude toward technology discussed by Burbules. It may also illustrate that the participants had some difficulty in considering the factors locally. Though they may not have thought about efficiency in relation to their e-mail message writing process, they may still have a more global or holistic desire to operate efficiently.

The rankings for both making efficient use of a superior’s time and demonstrating politeness toward one’s superior are also important to discuss. Making good use of a superior’s time ranked third in importance overall, while demonstrating politeness to a superior ranked fifth in importance overall. This latter factor also tied with making efficient use of one’s own time for the fewest
No. 1 importance rankings. Given that the participant interviews revealed such a great concern with making e-mail correspondence to superiors concise, the No. 3 ranking for making good use of a superior’s time seems commensurate. Yet, at FinanceUnited, the level of importance for attention to grammar outweighed the need to make good use of a superior’s time. Again, it might be that business conducted at FinanceUnited requires more attention to grammar and other types of correctness as opposed to worrying about a manager’s use of time. Some of the real-world e-mails collected from FinanceUnited participants help to illustrate this point. The following is an excerpt from a very long e-mail by a FinanceUnited novice to a manager, who requested a short description of some projects completed by the firm:

3. LSM Documentation - The loan score model is an extension of the CCM that provides the default cost for a specific loan. Though it had its own name, in actuality the LSM was simply two additional modules within the CCM. These modules were not fully documented to meet EUC requirements back in 2003 when the rest of the CCM was documented. Therefore, we created a set of documents for each of the two modules (Coefficients Module and Distribute Coefficients Module) to meet EUC requirements. We followed the same format in documenting these modules as was used for the CCM documentation in 2003.

Clearly, whether or not this description is “short” is subjective. But, it does seem to underscore a devotion to accuracy, competency, and correct grammar. Although I have no special knowledge of the project about which this consultant is communicating, in general the level of detail seems to project accuracy, the use of numerous acronyms to project competency (as one would need to be
quite competent within a particular subject to use such acronyms effectively), and the usage to avoid major errors or stumbling blocks.

Experienced consultants reported statistically more importance for making good use of a superior’s time than did novice consultants. This difference might be explained by novices focusing more on other attributes, or not necessarily understanding that it is important for them to think about making life easy for their bosses. For the politeness to superiors factor, although this again was not ranked very high (and lowest by experienced consultants), the rationale for its low ranking might have been hinted at in the participant interviews. The same holds true for lower ranking of making efficient use of a superior’s time by novices. Several interview participants indicated that, by communicating via e-mail as opposed to communicating over the telephone or face-to-face, they were doing so because they were concerned about imposing on the message recipient’s time. So, perhaps not in the act of writing the e-mail, but by selecting e-mail over other media in the first place, some consultants perceive that they are acknowledging that managers have time constraints and they are hoping to not impose on a manager’s valuable time. Again, this may signal a more “global” tendency toward efficiency. Also consistent with this line of reasoning is the interview response from an experienced employee at FinanceUnited, who indicated that he didn’t really think about politeness in e-mail messages. He focused on creating concise messages to superiors and on even “avoiding social pleasantries” in e-mail. Perhaps from his point of view, conciseness alone was the right tactic to maintain his relationship with a superior.
Efficiency and Politeness

Based on the factors noted as important by the participants, it would seem that neither politeness nor efficiency are key aspects that the participants are aware of considering while writing an e-mail message to a superior. Remember that traditional politeness theory, as proposed by such theorists as Brown and Levinson and Grice, expects that efficiency should pervade communication, but that one reason to stray from efficient communication tactics is to incorporate a sufficient indication of politeness in the interaction (Kellerman and Shea 147). Thus, we might expect novices to stray from efficiency more often in e-mails to superiors, given that they would have more focus on face concerns with higher-status individuals. In both the Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 e-mails from the questionnaire, all participants on average included about one suggestion and one direct request in each e-mail. Direct requests (deemed moderately to fairly polite and moderately to highly efficient) were used more often in the Scenario 1 e-mail (contacting one’s manager about errors in a client deliverable) while suggestions (deemed fairly polite and moderately efficient) were used more often in the Scenario 2 e-mail (contacting a senior manager about a promotion). Little variation occurred between novices and experienced consultants for the use of direct requests and suggestions in these e-mails. Given that these tactics present a good balance of both efficiency and politeness, it may be that the participants were not necessarily going out of their way to be efficient or polite, but that they did consider these factors at least to some degree. As opposed to some of the other available tactics, using direct requests and suggestions may have allowed the participants to still maintain conciseness in their messages.
GlobalTools employees were more likely to use hints than were FinanceUnited employees, which is somewhat inconsistent with the reported use of e-mail. Since FinanceUnited employees seemed to have fairly little regard for their own efficiency, it might seem probable that they would use more devices—such as hints—that are more inefficient. It may also be the case that neither set of employees is familiar with the level of efficiency associated with these tactics. However, hints, which are deemed fairly polite but inefficient, were used more than twice as often for Scenario 1 by novices than by experienced consultants. Thus, it might be the particular nature of this scenario—explaining to a manager that their deliverable contains major errors—necessitated at least some degree of attention to politeness as perceived by novices. Consider the following example:

I am glad that you asked me to review the “X” deliverable, in doing so, I found that this write up did not have the most recent information that I have been working on with the client (in fact we just wrapped that up this afternoon, so no one would have known except for us). I think that we can sit down first thing in the morning and incorporate these changes without impacting our ability to deliver this document to the client.

I apologize for not getting this to you sooner, but I am glad that we caught this before we presented this to Mr. X.

Rather than directly placing blame or pointing fingers, this GlobalTools novice instead hints that problems occurred, that the manager is not at fault, and that the situation can be remedied easily (through teamwork) to maintain client satisfaction. Conversely, some participants did not seem to work to incorporate more polite tactics into their messages at all. In fact, the following Scenario 1
message, written by a male experienced GlobalTools employee, is rather threatening in nature:

Bob –

Per our discussion, I have begun reviewing our final deliverable due out to the client tomorrow. I am not done with the document but I have found several significant issues that need to be corrected. The errors are significant enough that I am not even sure if I am looking at the right version of the doc. THIS DOCUMENT CANNOT GO OUT TO THE CLIENT WITHOUT SOME MAJOR REWORK. We need to talk about this tonight to fix the issues and submit this critical deliverable tomorrow.

This message is direct and to the point, and even includes all-upper-case letters, a device often thought to mimic “yelling” in an e-mail message. Overall, few threats were found in the corpus of e-mail messages, and none were found in the Scenario 2 messages. It is likely that none of the participants felt comfortable threatening a more senior manager when discussing a promotion. Such a message might not have warranted the efficiency that Brown and Levinson suggest would cause a sender to stray from using polite language; rather, concerns for face remained heightened for Scenario 2, as detailed further in the next sections.

**Audience Considerations**

From several perspectives, whether they are rhetorically based (with persuasion as the goal) or politeness-theory based (with understanding as the goal), concern for audience in communication is critical. However, with the e-mail medium, research has shown that concern for audience often decreases
because no physical audience exists for the communication. According to Friedman and Currall (citing Clark and Brennan) there are several attributes of face-to-face communication that help to ground the conversation: co-presence, visibility, audibility, co-temporality, simultaneity, and sequentiality (1328). None of these attributes is available with e-mail. And, when the study participants were asked if the lack of a physical recipient affected what they say, the average response leaned more toward disagreement than agreement. Might this mean that the participants were actually not very sympathetic to the needs of their audience? Other findings from this study—detailed in forthcoming sections—illustrate that the participants do consider their audience. Although the participants did not seem to focus, necessarily, on creating schemas or personas for their physically absent recipients, many of the participant interviews revealed that these consultants do consider that they do not necessarily know the demeanor or personality of the person who will be receiving the message.

Experienced consultants had the highest level of agreement with the statement that the lack of a physical recipient influenced what they say, while novices had the least level of agreement. Given this difference, one might go back to Burbles’ idea of younger generations having a more “trivializing” attitude toward technology. The novice consultants may have been more likely to have grown up using e-mail and may not consciously consider the fact that their audience is solely virtual. Yet more experienced consultants may notice a greater difference with their recipient not being present or might have learned over time that it does, indeed, matter. Surprisingly, though, nearly all of the interview participants—from both companies and experience levels—indicated that they think about the lack of social cues in their e-mail very much. One novice related a particularly interesting story concerning this issue. Previously, he contracted for
an overseas client and never met this person; yet, they had an extensive relationship through e-mail. Finally, toward the end of the project, the client attended a presentation given by this participant. When they met face-to-face, the client appeared shocked that his contractor was just 28 years old, as their e-mail exchanges had somehow convinced him that this contractor was an older, more senior person. After this experience, the novice indicated that he began to think much, much more about his own e-mail audience and what he might be missing in e-mail exchanges. This anecdote, along with the findings from the questionnaire data, suggest that the participants are not the “profoundly asocial” users of e-mail that Friedman and Currall, Sproull and Kiesler, and Truss found in their research.

Another interesting finding is this: even though the average participant noted that he or she did not consider the lack of a physical audience when using e-mail, the majority of participants in their scenario e-mail responses suggested or requested a telephone call or physical meeting with the recipient in lieu of or in addition to continuing the communication over e-mail. For Scenario 2 this is not surprising, given that the point of the scenario was to set up a meeting. Yet, for Scenario 1, it appears that perhaps e-mail communication was not sufficient. Ninety percent of the FinanceUnited consultants initiated a request or suggestion for spoken contact in response to this scenario, while not quite two-thirds of the GlobalTools participants did the same. The difference between experienced and novice consultants was minor. So, although the participants leaned toward disagreeing that the lack of an audience altered their message, they seemed to acknowledge that e-mail alone might not be sufficient to resolve the issue at hand.
Thus, based on their actions, perhaps the participants (and particularly the FinanceUnited consultants) are more cognizant of the dearth of social cues in e-mail than they realize. Furthermore, by making themselves available to meet or talk through their e-mail communication, these consultants may realize what scholars Burgess and Rice both found—that e-mail messages may not give recipients enough information to act on. By including their cell phone number or requesting a face-to-face meeting, it may be that the participants hope to quickly deflect any possible misunderstandings that might occur via e-mail. It may also be that they subconsciously realize that they can be better communicators when they have available such assets as body language, facial expression, and speech, instruments that the media naturalness theory suggests are ingrained aspects of human communication behavior. Or, we might even look to Plato’s Phaedrus to explain this preference for spoken discourse, as Plato has Socrates explain that speech is preferable to writing in that the former allows for simultaneous, immediate, and enhanced participation in logical reasoning (166).

Another attribute of e-mail to include in this discussion of audience consideration is that of greeting and closing. Studies have found that the lack of a physical audience for e-mail messages may cause senders to focus more strongly on their own needs and less on those of the recipient. “One indicator of this [inward focus] is that people dispense with direct acknowledgements of the other person, that is, salutations. Another indicator of this is that people are more likely to use a closing (i.e., the author’s name) than a salutation (other’s name)” (Sproull and Kiesler, Reducing 1500). However, the results of this study found just the opposite. Participants—in their e-mail scenario responses—were more apt to use a greeting than a closing. Greetings were used by novices more than any other segment. Additionally, each of the real-world e-mails shared by the
interview participants contained some form of greeting and closing. Based on this evidence, it would seem that employees in an organizational setting may, in fact, have concern for their audience despite the fact that no audience member is physically present. This finding is contradictory to much of the current literature. In considering this discrepancy, it should be noted that some participants may have forgone a closing in an attempt to keep their questionnaire-based messages anonymous.

Another type of evidence to consider is attention to grammar and usage correctness in e-mail. Using proper grammar in e-mail messages has been found to make the message recipient feel as if the sender had more regard for him or her (Jessmer and Anderson 343). Based on the scenario response data, errors in grammar or usage were found in approximately one half of the messages. Strangely, more errors were found in the Scenario 2 messages, which were directed to a senior manager requesting a meeting to discuss issues surrounding a promotion. One might imagine that both novice and experienced consultants sending such a message to a high-level manager would take the necessary time to ensure its grammatical correctness. Again, given the questionnaire-based nature of these messages, less than the usual amount of time could have been devoted to proofreading. Although at least one grammar mistake was found in about 50% of the messages, this level of error may or may not indicate a lack of concern for audience. Jessmer and Anderson note that the use of poor grammar and misspellings might imply that the sender is uneducated; however, in the corporate environment where the participants work, it is likely that message recipients would expect their colleagues to have at least an undergraduate degree. In my personal experience, grammar, spelling, and usage mistakes are the norm in e-mail messages. Thus, the number of grammar errors found in this
study seems relatively low (with the fewest being made by the FinanceUnited participants) and may suggest that senders are consciously or subconsciously concerned about the recipient’s regard for them. All in all, concern for audience, as found in this study, may be greater than the literature suggests.

**Balancing Relationship and Organizational Needs**

Successful existence in the working world appears to require a good deal of finesse: not only do successful workers demonstrate skill and self-assurance, but they also do so while maintaining an appropriate level of deference and politeness to their superiors. The literature shows that novices may have the most difficulty in achieving this balance. This may be in part because academic training focuses more on organizational needs—areas such as correctness, efficiency, and competency—and less on relationship needs—politiveness and overall social awareness. Today’s changing work environment may also contribute to novices having difficulty achieving the right balance; more and more organizations are becoming less hierarchical in nature, communication media such as e-mail may contribute to a more egalitarian environment, and an increase in remote work environments—whether due to telecommuting or geographically dispersed teams and clients—changes the nature of interactions.

The e-mail scenario data collected in this study show mixed results for achieving such balance. For Scenario 1, on average the participants showed a good balance of using similar levels of language attuned to relationship and organizational needs. For Scenario 2, however, there was much more focus on relationship needs on average. At first glance, this difference may not seem far-fetched. Research in the field of organizational speech communication has found that employees use different levels of politeness based on the stature of the
person with whom they are speaking. In one study conducted by Morand, “the data clearly indicate that subjects systematically varied their speech according to their perception of the social distribution of power” (*Dominance* 551). Given that Scenario 2 asked the participants to send an e-mail to a more senior manager than in Scenario 1, the greater focus on relationship needs—deference, non-imposition, and solidarity—seems reasonable. Yet, the degree to which the balance on relationship and organizational needs changed by segment between the two scenarios warrants further discussion.

For instance, for Scenario 1, although on average there was more focus placed on relationship needs, the FinanceUnited and experienced segments actually used more language focused on organizational needs. Consistent with previous discussion, a focus on organizational needs, particularly on solidarity and deference, may have been more appropriate in this scenario given the time constraints and possible presentation to the client of incorrect information. Non-imposition may have been a little-invoked factor in this situation because it was important that the subordinate impose on the manager to prevent a grave mistake. A contrary explanation might also be plausible. Indications of non-imposition in the Scenario 1 messages may have been low because the consultants felt that simply by sending an e-mail—as opposed to using telephone or face-to-face conversation—that they were enacting a degree of non-imposition toward their manager. This explanation is supported by the dual-capacity theory of communication, where a media channel contains both a capacity for containing data and symbolic meaning. In the two participant organizations, it seems plausible that a symbolic aspect of selecting e-mail as opposed to other media is that e-mail signifies “non-imposition.” The participants’ general focus on brevity is also important. It is not only writing an e-mail as opposed to another
type of communication, but it is writing a short e-mail that may in fact suggest a consideration of non-imposition toward superiors.

In Scenario 2, where there was a key focus on relationship needs within the participants' e-mails, most messages were highest on the relationship attribute deference and lowest on solidarity, and very low on the organizational needs of confidence and direction. FinanceUnited, whose participants had the lowest overall relationship needs in Scenario 1, jumped to the second highest relationship needs compared to the lowest organizational needs in Scenario 2. Novices, also, had a very large spread between their relationship and organizational needs for Scenario 2. Reference Table 9 (repeated from the Results chapter) for further detail.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9, Relationship versus Organizational Needs, Average Times Used Per Message, By Participant Segment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tactic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 1</strong></td>
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<td>Deference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-imposition Solidarity</td>
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<td>Total Relationship</td>
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<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Direction</td>
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<td>Individuality</td>
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<td>Total Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Scenario 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-imposition Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Relationship</td>
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<td>Confidence</td>
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Clearly, contacting a senior-level manager to arrange for a meeting to talk about promotions is a task that requires a high level of politeness and concern for face. The fact that the FinanceUnited consultants altered their use of relationship indicators for this scenario—particularly deference and non-imposition—seems somewhat odd given the egalitarian nature of that organization and its relative lack of hierarchies. Consider the following message written by a FinanceUnited employee for Scenario 2:

Jim,

When your schedule allows, I’d like to meet with you to discuss some things I’d like to accomplish over the next year and how those could fit into the advancement of my career at the firm. As part of the meeting, I’d like to get a better sense about what the expectations are for me to continue taking on additional responsibility.

Let me know when some good times for you are—my schedule is pretty clear over the next week.

Thanks.

This employee seems to go out of his way to be polite and accommodating to his upper-level manager. Some degree of politeness and accommodation is certainly expected; but the flat nature of the corporate structure at FinanceUnited might suggest that even a subordinate would not need to place so much emphasis on relationship needs in an e-mail concerning a possible promotion.

Another strange instance also occurs with Scenario 2. Novices actually decreased dramatically in their use of language connoting solidarity when sending the message to the senior-level manager. One might assume that when preparing a senior-level manager to discuss a promotion that the sender would
actually key in on how he or she is a team player. One issue to consider, however, at least for the GlobalTools novices, might be the fact that it is quite likely that they have never met—in person—the manager who will make decisions about their raises and promotions. Because of its international presence, employees within the same chain of command at GlobalTools—especially for HR purposes—are often not physically or geographically co-located. The following message, written by a GlobalTools novice, places greater emphasis on individuality than solidarity:

SAM,

I would like to meet to discuss my plans for achieving a promotion within this year. Please let me know what times will work for you.

Though this message is not inherently rude or even lacking in deference, it seems to make some assumptions: namely that the novice consultant will, indeed, be promoted and will be promoted within a certain timeframe, and that the senior manager will want to meet to talk about these plans. Additional illustration of solidarity or perhaps less confidence would have made a more balanced message.

Although many novices seemed to have trouble balancing the relationship and organizational needs, many experienced consultants also had this same problem. Even when focusing purely on age and not consulting experience, it did not seem that older employees—and likely more seasoned members of the workforce in general—had a distinctively greater success rate at balancing various needs in their messages. Gender, though, may play a role in this balancing act. When analyzing the types of language used by men versus women in this study, some key differences came to light related to Scenario 2. On average, women used more deference and less direction than men when
requesting the meeting to discuss a promotion. Regardless of age, women may feel uncomfortable requesting higher levels of responsibility or may be reluctant to show they have met certain requirements to receive a promotion. Although a discussion of women’s historical roles in the business world is outside the scope of this paper, a study of the way in which e-mail is continuing or changing workplace communication standards for women might have value.

*Actual Versus Reported Use of E-mail*

As in the pilot study for this research, this study also found some difference between the way that the participants report that they use e-mail and the way that they actually use e-mail. The literature suggests that e-mail continues to evolve and that few standards exist for its use. It would not be surprising, then, if the participants thought one way about e-mail but then implemented their messages differently. Comparing reported versus actual use also provides indications of how the participants might be failing to use e-mail as they expect to use it.

Appendix 4 contains a diagram that illustrates the relative difference between levels of importance and use for the various relationship and organizational needs. Two areas—deference and individuality—were reported with fairly low levels of agreement, suggesting that the participants did not feel as if theses factors were sufficiently important to include in e-mail messages to superiors. Yet on average, in both Scenario 1 and Scenario 2, the participants used about one instance of deference and nearly one instance of individuality per message. This disconnect might be explained by several reasons. First, the participants might not have had a clear understanding of what was really meant by the Likert statements covering deference and individuality. Second, a
comment from one of the participant interviews also appears relevant. An experienced GlobalTools employee, when discussing the factors that he considers when composing an e-mail, mentioned that for him, politeness in e-mail goes without saying. He said, “It needs no special consideration because it’s just something that you must do with e-mail.” If this was the case for many participants, it may be that even though they reported lower levels of agreement with including deference in their messages, they simply did it any way because such inclusion is second nature. Conversely, participants reported the strongest level of agreement with the statement that they would want to include indications of solidarity in their messages. Yet in Scenario 2 less than one instance of solidarity was found in every two messages. Likewise, none of the participant interviews revealed that the consultants focused on considerations of solidarity in their messages. It might be that in general the participants found it important to highlight indications of teamwork in their e-mail messages, but that the particular scenarios in question did not necessitate such indications. Or, given that “teamwork” may be a politically correct term in today’s organizations, it might be that the participants simply felt it necessary to report agreement with its importance as opposed to actually focusing on it in their messages. Finally, Herr’s conflicting mental models might also help to shed some light on this disconnect between reported and actual e-mail use. Although Herr is comparing different paradigms that people may use to classify e-mail—the memo, conference, or conversation models—a different type of conflict may exist here. Herr notes of today’s employees, “A lack of awareness of their [mental models’] differences and of the existence of more than one mental model could disrupt the effectiveness of email communication in any business community” (18). Similarly, it could be the case that the participants in this study are continuing to struggle
with the way in which they define e-mail, resulting in inconsistencies between the
way it is discussed and the way it is actually used.

**E-mail Purpose and Organizational Context**

As we have already discussed audience considerations, it also seems
appropriate to discuss the way that the remainder of the rhetorical situation—
purpose and context—shape the way that employees, and especially novices,
make decisions about how they will use e-mail at work when communicating with
superiors. First, let’s consider purpose. Based on all of the data collected—
through the questionnaires, interviews, and live e-mail data—it appears that both
experienced and novice consultants alike select their media based on the
purpose of the task at hand. In general, it appears that e-mail is preferred for
routine tasks, such as providing information or scheduling a meeting. Rogers and
Lee-Wong’s organizational needs—confidence, direction, and individuality—
seem fairly easily carried out through the e-mail medium. Furthermore, with the
participants’ desire to convey accuracy and competency—consistent with
organizational needs—e-mail provides the right venue to support such needs,
allowing for the ability to review and to condense one’s use of language.
Conversely, more traditional media, such as the telephone or face-to-face
meetings, appear to be preferred for relationship building. When the participants
wanted to add that personal touch to a communication, it appeared that they
would prefer to do so via spoken conversation. However, certain exemptions
were also found to this “rule.” Although non-imposition is considered one of the
relationship needs, the interview data suggest that simply by selecting e-mail in
the first place, the participants may feel as if they are doing a better job of
avoiding imposing on their superiors than they would do with other, more
traditional media. Choosing e-mail may signal one type of relationship need—non-imposition—while choosing spoken conversation may allow for more indications of deference and solidarity. Also, it may be that one’s credibility—an aspect of illustrating self-assurance—may be difficult to communicate via e-mail. Thus, although e-mail may be best for many organizational tasks, e-mail alone may not provide enough richness or ability to convey experience as would a spoken conversation. On a related note, the participants as a whole leaned toward disagreeing that e-mail is similar to a spoken conversation. As the participants in general lauded the attributes of e-mail that are dissimilar to spoken conversation, including its asynchronous nature (allowing for non-imposition) and ability for revising (allowing for accuracy, competency, and conciseness), this finding is in keeping with other data.

The idea of context has been a running theme throughout this discussion. Clearly, we have established that the different natures of the two participant organizations contribute to the different ways in which e-mail is viewed and used. This finding is consistent with work put forward by Rogers et al. in discussing organizational voice. They note that organizational voice includes “the particular configuration of mutually constructed and dynamic writing and speaking practices and products that enable, define, and redefine the individual roles and collective relationships, tasks, goals, and values of an organization” (Rogers qtd in Rogers et al. 374). Organizational context—including but not limited to presence of hierarchies, nature of work, and overall size—seems to influence the way in which e-mail is used. Yet, at the same time, it does not seem that individuals have been socialized at work to use e-mail in a particular way. No interview participant indicated that he or she had received any type of e-mail training or guidelines, though two participants expressed that FinanceUnited dictated strict
guidelines for memos and reports. Without the socialization or ritual that Goffman highlights for spoken conversation, where do employees turn to learn acceptable e-mail use for their organization? Apparently, based on participant interviews, sometimes consultants simply resort to copying the style used by a client or a particular team which they work. Yet, without company-wide guidelines, it may be that e-mail will not be used in the ways that are most beneficial to the organization as a whole.
CHAPTER 6—IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was designed to define some of the decision criteria that novice workers use when composing e-mail messages to their managers. Specifically, through research within the consulting industry, I wanted to determine if experience level and organizational context affected the use of politeness techniques in subordinate to superior e-mail communication. For some aspects of the rhetorical situation, experience level did seem to determine the way in which the consultant composed an e-mail message to a superior. In other cases, organizational construct seemed more responsible for particular e-mail use than did experience. Other factors, such as gender, also seemed to affect choices about e-mail use. In general, it can be said that the study participants used three primary decision criteria. First, they considered the purpose of the message. For routine tasks or documentation, e-mail was thought to be an appropriate message conductor. The permanent nature of e-mail caused the participants to worry about the accuracy of their messages, but its capability to be reviewed and revised gave the novice consultants, especially, a level of comfort when communicating with their superiors. Conversely, if the purpose of a communication interaction was to establish personal credibility or build a relationship, the participants preferred to use more traditional spoken communication media, such as telephone calls or face-to-face meetings. Little difference, then, existed between participants of various experience levels and organizations when considering e-mail purpose.
Secondly, the participants considered their audience. When sending an e-mail message to a client or superior, a key concern was to make the message concise. When brevity was not possible, the participants indicated that devices such as lists, bullets, or other formatting techniques should be used to allow for easier digestion of the material by the superior. Although the participants did not report being overly concerned with making efficient use of their superiors’ time when considering how to compose messages to the superiors, the concern for brevity may, in fact, indicate a more global concern for efficiency. For e-mail messages aimed at colleagues as opposed to superiors, participants in general put far less thought into the content and character of the message. When writing e-mail messages to senior managers as opposed to less powerful managers, illustrating one’s awareness of relationship needs—deference, non-imposition, and solidarity—appeared to be more crucial. In general, novice consultants may be slightly more aware of the power differential between themselves and their managers than are more experienced employees. The novices’ common use of hints within their messages may signal an additional layer of politeness.

Finally, the context for the e-mail communication situation was also considered by the participants. Participants seemed keenly aware of today’s climate of e-mail overload and realized that for important, time-sensitive communications, e-mail might not be the best method. If e-mail was used in pressing situations, for example, when client work was at stake, the participants understood that spoken communication might also be necessary and often included telephone contact information or a request for a face-to-face meeting. Organizational goals, norms, and structures also played a part in the participants’ decision-making process. Through some type of acculturation to the organization, consultants seemed to be aware of issues of credibility, accuracy,
and power-distance. Surprisingly, though, no training was offered to these participants at their representative organizations concerning how to best use e-mail to support the firm’s culture. So, across participants, message and organizational context played a role in the thought and composition processes surrounding e-mail messages to superiors.

Besides providing a more informed view of employees’ decision-making criteria, this study revealed some ways in which it may be important to re-evaluate the concept of politeness for e-mail. Since most of the research concerning politeness centers on spoken conversation, more studies like this one are needed to better understand the ways in which politeness might best be used within e-mail, which carries some but not all of the characteristics of traditional spoken conversations. First, though some degree of non-imposition is likely necessary for subordinates to display appropriate relationship needs in a workplace communication, it may be that the selection of e-mail—as opposed to the language used within e-mail—acts as a symbolic form of non-imposition. For instance, within the body of an e-mail message, instead of apologizing for intruding upon a manager’s valuable time or going out of one’s way to allow the manager to make decisions, it may be that a message sender can avoid imposing on a superior by simply sending an e-mail message instead of using a telephone call or face-to-face meeting. These latter communication forms require a synchronous response, while an e-mail message can be read and addressed on the recipient’s own time (again, perhaps indicating that the participants did think about their superiors’ efficiency when reading e-mail messages). It is important to further examine workplace e-mails to see if politeness exists in the choice of medium instead of the message language itself. Additionally, although the literature suggests that e-mail messages senders may often dispense with a
greeting because they are not concerned with the feelings of the recipient, this study found that both greetings and closings are recognized and used and as important elements of workplace e-mail communication. This may illustrate that message senders within organizations have more regard for their recipients than the literature predicts. Further research on a larger sample might verify this finding.

Another area of this study suggesting a need for additional research concerns the way in which the e-mail messages are interpreted. Although a consistent coding procedure was used, an ideal study would gauge the response of the e-mail messages’ true recipients (such methodology is also suggested by Rogers and Lee-Wong 397). Some managers might not mind informality or spelling and grammar mistakes and would not interpret them as a lack of respect or recognition of their authority. Another possibility for supplementary study deals with the changing use of language. Research by Searle and Rogers and Lee-Wong suggests that, over time, conventional uses of language change. Just as we today might end a conversation with a friend by saying “See you later” when we have no intention of seeing that person for quite some time, certain elements of language within the e-mail data may have taken on conventional meanings different from their traditional ones. For instance, “Let me know” was coded as a direct request. But might that now simply be a common way of ending one’s e-mail message?

Engaging in this study also shed some light on related areas of study that might prove beneficial in better understanding subordinate to superior reporting in an organizational communication setting. First, several of the interview participants mentioned that they had developed particular ways of using e-mail because they either worked remotely or contracted for a geographically distant
client with whom they never met. Given the rise in telecommuting and the advent of so much business taking place via electronic means, it may be worthwhile to examine if nontraditional workplace settings further affect e-mail communication dynamics. It may be that our understanding of power and authority in organizations needs to be adjusted to incorporate new time and space parameters (Eisenberg and Riley 316). Second, some participants acknowledged that one of the other industries in which they had worked was the military. Two interview participants were also former servicemen, and they both praised the way in which the military’s prescriptive use of e-mail helped them to employ that medium successfully. From directives such as using a particular structure to including one’s rank in the signature field, a formal, mandated methodology for structuring certain aspects of e-mail might have potential benefits for non-military organizations. Clearly, however, an overly prescriptive format would not allow for the flexibility that workplace situations demand; as Johns notes, it is most important that workplace writers be equipped with strong problem-solving skills that will allow them to assess the situation and determine which types of models might be necessary for their writing (183). Further research might determine if former servicemen or even ROTC students, trained in military communications, experienced any additional success in business settings with their e-mail communication because of the military’s instruction.

This study also revealed that the jury may still be out concerning whether today’s novices are as ill-prepared to communicate within organizational power structures as the literature would have one believe. The body of e-mail data that was collected suggested that, in some situations, novices in general do a good job of balancing both relationship and organizational needs in their messages to superiors. On a case-by-case basis, however, some novices appear inept.
Consider the following example (for Scenario 1) from the questionnaire data from a GlobalTools novice:

Incorrect recommendation [sic] in deliverables [sic], data misleading. We must fix this problem or we’ll feel the heat from the client and may lose future business. Not only does this message contain improper usage and spelling, it also contains a very informal undertone that may not be appropriate within the hierarchical nature of the organization. This same participant’s message regarding setting up a meeting to discuss information surrounding a promotion is no better:

Hi SAM,

At your convenience, I’d like to meet and get some info on how to get promoted.

Once again, although there is some sign of non-imposition, this message is very informal. It also suggests that the sender has little confidence or direction, as he makes no mention of achievements that might merit a promotion or research into the promotion process. In the same token, although this individual did not excel at balancing relationship and organizational needs, the study data suggest that this balancing act does not necessarily improve with experience level or age.

Granted, most study participants exhibited more aptitude for appropriately framing their message content and for considering their audience. Yet, although certain commonalities among the study participants’ views about e-mail did emerge, it seems that many contrasting views still exist concerning several facets of this hybrid communication medium. One likely culprit for these many views is the dearth of training the participants received concerning organizational e-mail use. That said, it seems logical—and warranted by this study’s findings—to suggest that educators and organizations place greater emphasis on e-mail
training. This training must provide entrants into the business world with a penchant for flexibility in composing their e-mail messages, flexibility to consider and then implement language that simultaneously addresses power differentials, respect for audience, individual achievement, and situational constraints. For instance, workers must realize that although they may have grown up crafting e-mails full of spelling mistakes and non-standard conventions and faced few sanctions, writing in the workplace has implications for the way that the message recipient feels about the sender and his or her level of respect for the recipient. The key is not to provide employees with a rigid formula for crafting e-mail messages, but rather to urge them to consider both the communicative (understanding) and rhetorical (persuasive) value of their messages.

Educators and organizations alike must concentrate on better preparing students and novice workers, in particular, for successful workplace e-mail communication. Johns makes an important point about how students encounter different requirements in school and at work:

In school, students learn to write to one audience (the teacher), to work alone, to reveal what they know about a subject, and to achieve a high grade as the only result. In the workplace, the same students must write to many different audiences, often work in groups or must receive a supervisor’s approval for the document, should focus on what the readers need to know about the subject, and hope to achieve very specific results from the document. Thus, the total context—audience, method, content, and purpose—differs significantly between academic and workplace writing. (Johns 156)
Although it is the case that students will likely need help in improving all of their writing to best adapt it for workplace contexts, e-mail remains a unique challenge because of its hybrid, ephemeral nature.

For academia, the challenge is to instruct students concerning cultural adaptation (Anson and Forsberg 228) and linguistic politeness strategies and tone (Hagge and Kostelnick 334; Rogers and Lee-Wong 388) when composing e-mail messages in an organizational setting. Teaching students about “correct” letter, memo, and report format or about standard grammar and usage constructs is not enough; rather, just as with their spoken business communications, students must be prepared to write e-mail messages that can respond to the demands of complex organizational and relationship factors. Becoming a successful workplace writer (and e-mailer) “is much more a matter of developing strategies for social and intellectual adaptations to different professional communities than acquiring a set of generic skills” (Anson and Forsberg 201).

For business, the challenge is foregoing the assumption that new entrants into the business world are capable of effective e-mail use (Burgess et al. 72; Nantz and Drexel 45). Sproull and Kiesler found that three primary strategies guide behavior in different communication situations: instruction, experience, and processing cues (Connections 38). For novices using e-mail, experience is lacking and many social cues are unavailable. That leaves training as a viable method for best acculturating novices—and maybe even refreshing workplace veterans—into the way that e-mail communication should address audience, purpose, and context when communicating with superiors and clients alike. For instance, if e-mail continues to be a norm for subordinate to superior communication, how might subordinates instill their understanding of relationship needs in an e-mail message besides simply asking the recipients to contact them
over the telephone or face-to-face? No singular answer to this quandary may exist; but it’s important that users of organizational e-mail at least acknowledge these potential areas for concern.

Technologies, including e-mail, will continue to change the nature of the workplace. Rather than simply adopting a laissez-faire attitude toward new technologies, both academia and business must acknowledge that they have a powerful influence on work culture and norms. From closeness of supervision to perceptions of privacy to politeness norms (Eisenberg and Riley 315), e-mail has dramatically changed the way that businesses conduct work on a day-to-day basis. This study found that novice and experienced employees in two consulting organizations did share some common beliefs about the best way to craft e-mails to superiors. Although their decision criteria focus on considerations of audience, purpose, and context – the triad of the rhetorical situation also deemed appropriate for assessing how to communicate in traditional spoken and written media – the new, blended feature set of e-mail necessitates some special considerations of how to address both relationship and organizational needs and even whether or not an e-mail communication allows for content and symbolic character appropriate to the situation. It is important that we continue to investigate new technologies like e-mail and determine how or if they necessitate a new outlook on the way that organizational communication takes place.
APPENDICES
Appendix 1—Questionnaire

To collect the participant data, a web-based questionnaire was used. These tables illustrate the look and feel of the questionnaire, though it has been broken up by sections. Where applicable, each section is followed by a table that details the selections available to the participants through the drop-down menus or radio buttons. Note that some information has been changed to mask the identity of the organizations.

### E-mail Communication Questionnaire

#### Section 1: Background

Please provide an answer to each question using the mechanism provided (blank space or drop-down menu).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Potential Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age: ____________</td>
<td>Highest Level of Education: [drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex: [drop-down menu]</td>
<td>Current Level / Band: [drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked in the consulting industry? (round as needed)</td>
<td>[drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you worked in other industries? If so, which ones?</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked for GlobalTools / FinanceUnited? (round as needed)</td>
<td>[drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About how long have you been staffed on your current project? (number of months)</td>
<td>________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you perceive your job security?</td>
<td>[drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your comfort level with technology?</td>
<td>[drop-down menu]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Drop-Down Menu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Bachelors</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Level / Band¹</td>
<td>Band 6 / Level 1</td>
<td>Band 6 / Level 2</td>
<td>Band 6 / Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked in the consulting industry? (round as needed)</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked at</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 2: Scenario Responses

The following two questions ask you to imagine a particular scenario and then to respond as required via e-mail. Although you will not be sending an actual e-mail message, please respond to the question as if you were writing an e-mail message. Spend about as much time on the message as you normally would in this type of situation. The messages may be as long or as short as you feel is appropriate (note: the text boxes will expand to fit your content).

2A: Your project manager has asked that you review a final deliverable before it is turned in to the client tomorrow afternoon. The deliverable is a 50-page document that summarizes recommendations that you’re presenting to the client regarding a new business strategy. You have had a significant role on the project to date. As you begin to review the deliverable, you notice several major errors in content; in particular, the key recommendation is incorrect and one of the diagrams provides misleading data. You’re not sure how the PM let such mistakes occur in the document. It’s late in the evening and you want to make sure that you inform your boss about the problems ASAP. Compose an e-mail message alerting your boss to the errors.

To: manager@company.com
From: consultant@company.com
Subject: ____________________

Body of Message:

2B: You have decided that you’d like to schedule a meeting with your senior manager (or equivalent manager) to discuss actions that you should take to seek a promotion. Although you’re somewhat familiar with the GlobalTools / FinanceUnited professional development process, you’d really like to move up this year, and you want to know what it will take, both administratively and from a performance perspective. Compose an e-mail to your senior manager requesting a meeting to discuss the issues at hand.

To: seniormanager@company.com
From: consultant@company.com
Subject: ____________________

Body of Message:

Section 3: Thoughts and Feelings

3A: This section requires that you rank the factors below in their order of importance to you, given the scenario at hand. Scenario: When you write an e-mail message that delivers bad news to a superior, what factors do you consider when you compose the message? What is your ‘ranking’ of these factors as compared to each other?

Please select a different numeric ranking for each factor from the drop-down menu (1 = most
important, 2 = second-most important, … 6 = least important). If you do not consider the factor at all, choose the ‘do not consider’ option from the drop-down menu (and rank the rest of the factors 1 through 5, 1 through 4, etc.).

**Remember: USE EACH NUMBER ONLY ONE TIME. DO NOT USE THE SAME NUMBER TWICE.**

Creating a message that is grammatically correct [drop-down menu]
Demonstrating competency on the subject matter at hand [drop-down menu]
Ensuring that all information included in the message is accurate [drop-down menu]
Making efficient use of your superior’s time [drop-down menu]
Making efficient use of your time as you write the message [drop-down menu]
Signifying an appropriate level of politeness toward your superior [drop-down menu]

3B: Please mark the level of agreement that most closely mirrors your feelings and / or actions regarding the questions. Think about the questions as if you were in a situation where you’d be communicating via e-mail with a superior in your direct chain of command at GlobalTools / FinanceUnited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I compose an e-mail, I use writing that indicates that I know my place within the ‘pecking order’ of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it’s important that my e-mail messages not burden others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I write an e-mail message, I want my ideas to be available for input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My e-mail messages highlight that I’m a team player and that I want to work with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I write an e-mail, I always try to ensure that it reflects my confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My e-mails typically underscore my level of expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My e-mail messages typically show that I don’t require ‘hand-holding’ from higher-ups; I can work independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it’s vital that my e-mails reflect my individual contributions to the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fact that a recipient isn’t physically present as I write my e-mail message impacts what I say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I view e-mail as being similar to a spoken conversation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drop-Down Menu</th>
<th>Potential Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each of the six e-mail factors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Buttons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section 4: Interview Opt-In

To better understand the ways in which you use e-mail, I would very much like the opportunity to talk with you. If you would be willing to participate in a brief (20 to 30 minute) phone or in-person interview, please indicate so by checking the appropriate box below and noting your name and contact information. I will then contact you to set up the interview at your convenience. Again, this is not a required part of the questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Each of the 10 Likert statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I would like to participate in an interview. Please contact me (Yes or No)  

Name: ____________________  

E-mail Address: ________________
Appendix 2—Interview Questions

1. What do you like about e-mail as compared to face-to-face or telephone communication? What do you dislike?

2. How do you feel you do expressing yourself via e-mail as opposed to via face-to-face or telephone conversation? Is one more comfortable than the other? Why?

3. Are there specific situations at work were you’d typically choose to communicate via e-mail? Via face-to-face conversation? If so, what are they?

4. When you write an e-mail, what are the factors that you think about as you compose the message? (note: if participant is confused, prompt with items such as accuracy, competency, teamwork, and deference)

5. When you write an e-mail to a client or manager as opposed to a peer, how does your message change?

6. Do you think that your organization is prescriptive in terms of the composition and use of e-mail? In other words, is their a ‘right way’ to develop an e-mail message?

7. Some theorists argue that e-mail is weak in social cues (e.g., there’s no indication of a recipient’s age, wealth, dress, expression, etc.) When you write an e-mail, do you think about the dearth of social cues? Why or why not?

8. How important is it to you to include suggestions of politeness in your e-mail messages? Why? Do you think about politeness more or less in writing an e-mail than in a spoken, face-to-face conversation? Why?
9. For more senior consultants only – do you think that some of the e-mails you receive from your subordinates are impolite? Why?

10. **(Live E-Mail Request)** I’d like to better understand how you use e-mail in your everyday work. Can you forward to me several (2 to 5) e-mails that you’ve sent to a peer several (2 to 5) e-mails that you’ve sent to a manager or client? Please indicate to which group the e-mail is being sent. Try to select e-mails that include at least a sentence or two (e.g., an e-mail indicating ‘Thanks’ would not meet my needs).

11. Additional questions as needed to follow up on questionnaire or better follow the flow of the interview.
### Appendix 3—Coding Parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description from Literature</th>
<th>Definition of Term for Coding</th>
<th>Examples from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compliance-Gaining Tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Request</td>
<td>Traditionally efficient but impolite; more recently noted as moderately to fairly polite and fairly to highly efficient</td>
<td>A formal yet impersonal way of asking for addressee action; the request may come across as a favor or as neutral, but addressee action is instrumental. This tactic will not involve modals (e.g., can, should, will, may, etc.)</td>
<td>“Let me know”; “Call me later”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hint</td>
<td>Traditionally moderately polite and inefficient</td>
<td>Words or phrases where the speaker indirectly, tentatively, subtly, and implicitly provides cues (implies) regarding the nature of something; the speaker does not come out and say what is wanted or desired, so the recipient must figure it out. For this tactic, context must also be reviewed to assess the indirectness of the statement in order to differentiate it from a suggestion.</td>
<td>“I am very interested in speaking with you”; “I’ve been thinking about doing…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise</td>
<td>Traditionally fairly polite and fairly efficient</td>
<td>An obligation or intention by the speaker as a means of giving the addressee an assurance.</td>
<td>“I promise”; “I’ll make sure this happens”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>Traditionally fairly polite and moderately efficient</td>
<td>Words or phrases where the speaker tries to tentatively assist / advise the addressee. This tactic often involves an interrogative or proposition. The speaker does, indeed, indicate what is wanted or desired.</td>
<td>“It would be good if we did…”; “I would like…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Traditionally impolite and fairly efficient</td>
<td>Words or phrases that convey an implicit condition of the addressee having to do something, perhaps with the speaker having intention of inflicting injury.</td>
<td>“There will be consequences”; “DO NOT TURN THIS IN TO THE CLIENT”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Relationship and Organizational Needs**                                                                                                  |
| Deference | “Communication displays an understanding of a respect for reporting relationships and the organizational structure.” “Deferent communications show an awareness that the organizational relationships are asymmetrical in one way or another…” | Illustration of the fact that the speaker has awareness that he has less power than does the addressee and communicating this awareness through an added respect for the addressee. | “Please”; “If you allow”; “upon your review”; using less drastic terminology, such as “issues” and not “errors” |
| Non-imposition | “Communication involves not burdening others with needless (or endless) requests, providing sufficient lead time, and expressing openness to refusal” | Working to lessen any burden placed on the addressee by the speaker, typically by giving the recipient an alternative. Focusing on letting the recipient make the decision (say, for a meeting time) as opposed to the speaker. | Hedges such as “might”, “would”; “Perhaps”; “when your schedule permits” |
| **Solidarity** | “Communication acknowledges an obligation to work with others. Tasks, issues, and problems are expressed in communal terms.” | Using words or phrases to illustrate commitment to a team / community as opposed to individual contribution. | “Our”; “we”; “I’m committed to our work” |
| **Confidence** | “Communication demonstrates an awareness that one can contribute to the organization through personal expertise.” | Words and phrases that show how the speaker is comfortable with and consciously making a personal contribution. Using words and phrases to indicate what one thinks and feels personally. | “I recommend”; “In my opinion”; “If we work late we can finish this” |
| **Direction** | “Communication indicates a sense of how to proceed, especially in completing assigned tasks and meeting individual performance demands. It suggests little need for hand-holding from a superior.” | An illustration of one’s ability to work independently and to guide one’s own work. Language connotes taking initiative. | “I will begin to make the corrections this evening”; “I’ve gone ahead” |
| **Individuality** | “Communication acknowledges that contribution is expected and that by nature of being an employee, one has some degree of personal responsibility to think and perform independently.” | Using words or phrases to illustrate one’s own contribution as opposed to commitment to a team community. Emphasizing a strong “yours” versus “mine” mentality. | “I” (exclusive of Confidence and Direction); “your deliverable is wrong” |

### Salutations

| **Greeting** | Engaging in a norm of the beginning of spoken conversation or formal written documents. | An indication that two people have come together for the purpose of communicating. | “Hi”; “Hello”; “Joe—” |
| **Closing** | Engaging in a norm of the end of spoken conversation or formal written documents. | Thanks: an acknowledgement that somehow the sender has benefited from the recipient. Regards: an assumption that the conversing is coming to a close (as in the opposed of a greeting). Implies a standard ending of the conversing, but not necessarily any acknowledgement of status. | “Thanks”; “Thank you” “Regards”; “Cheers”; “Talk to you later” |

### Grammar Issues

| **Grammar** | Per the literature, mistakes in grammar, mechanics, usage, spelling, etc. work to lessen the recipient’s perception that the sender has regard for him or her. | Only fairly egregious mistakes in grammar were noted. Common usage, such as passive voice or lack of parallelism, for instance, was not coded. | Misspellings; lack of punctuation; significant run-on sentences |
Appendix 4—Differences of Reported and Actual E-mail Use

Average Actual Instances in Scenario 1 E-mail Message

Most Used
- Solidarity
- Individuality
- Deference
- Direction

Average Actual Instances in Scenario 2 E-mail Message

Most Used
- Deference
- Non-Imposition
- Individuality
- Solidarity

Reported Agreement (1=strongest agreement) Based on Likert Statement Response

Most Agreement
- Solidarity
- Non-Imposition 2
- Direction
- Confidence 1
- Non-Imposition 1
- Deference
- Confidence 2
- Individuality

Non-Imposition 1 refers to making ideas available for input. Non-Imposition 2 refers to not burdening the recipient. Confidence 1 refers to confidence explicitly, while Confidence 2 refers more to showcasing expertise.


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ENDNOTES

i This e-mail example was provided by an acquaintance who knew that I was conducting research into workplace e-mail use.

ii This e-mail example was provided by a friend in my degree program (who had been forwarded this e-mail during the course of her job) who also knew that I was conducting research into e-mail use and politeness tactics.

iii For purposes of quantitative analysis, a ranking of ‘Do Not Consider’ was counted as the lowest ranking of six.

iv Traditionally, many scholars (including Brown and Levinson) have found direct requests to be highly efficient but relatively impolite compliance gaining strategies. Kellerman and Shea stray from this characterization, as they found direct requests to be efficient and also rather polite.

v All instances of actual participant organization names as provided by participants have been replaced with the pseudonyms being used in this study.

vi Note that these options were available to GlobalTools employees only; FinanceUnited employees simply filled in their title using a free-form field.

vii All quoted material in this section of the table should be attributed to Rogers and Lee-Wong.