

Langley Communications: Socializing and Snooping on E-mail

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YOU ARE A MEMBER of a project team at Langley Communications, a privately owned marketing communications firm headquartered in Los Angeles. Langley produces business meetings and trade shows, provides advertising support and promotional materials (such as brochures), and develops employee training programs for parts suppliers in the automobile and trucking industries. Almost a year ago, the company installed an e-mail system with access to the Internet but provided no policy or guidelines for use and, ironically, offered only a single brief training session for employees. Because of the crush of new business, management simply assumed that e-mail would become another useful medium for communicating within the company, including its offices in other cities, and with clients.

Incorporating E-mail into the Communication System

After nearly eleven months, e-mail is still not widely used at Langley for internal messages or for communicating with clients. In fact, it appears as if communication patterns and media were quite well ingrained before e-mail entered the scene, with voice mail the clear choice for internal messages. Upper managers rarely use e-mail, relying mainly on voice mail and paper memos generated by their staffs. Although middle managers tend to use e-mail for routine communications like scheduling meetings and making announcements, most remain partial to voice mail.

In contrast, members of Langley's project teams tend to be heavy users of e-mail and transmit many word-processed documents as attachments. They still use voice mail extensively for keeping abreast of the activities of other team members, no matter how scattered they

might be in the LA area, but they find e-mail to be valuable even for that task. Certainly, e-mail is preferable for many functions like getting buy-in from co-workers on client communications and reviewing changes in “deliverables” (like training programs for clients), especially since Langley provides no clerical support for project teams until the final stages of document production. Not surprisingly, the expectation of most Langley project teams now is that members will check their e-mail several times a day and respond swiftly.

Your project team—called the Yokohama Group because it works mostly with Japanese parts suppliers, particularly Yokohama Industries—is headed by Jake Larson, an accessible, easy-going guy in his late fifties. Although he reads and responds to messages from his Yokohama team members, Larson readily admits preferring to express himself orally rather than in writing at a computer.

“It’s easier and faster to talk to folks,” Jake says in his good-natured way. “E-mail is fine, but for me it takes longer to write out a message than to leave a voice mail.”

Very different from laid-back Jake Larson is Bart Borden, head of the project team called the Domestic Group, which works almost exclusively with American parts suppliers. Bart Borden is highly self-confident and has the answer for every question—especially anything to do with e-mail, about which he claims to be the resident expert. Said to be something of a control freak, Borden issues frequent orders and is known around the office as *Barracuda Bart*. Among the “work-hard, play-hard” culture at Langley, Bart Borden stands out as a workaholic, rarely joining “the troops” (as he calls his team members) who frequently head out for relaxation together after work.

Both Jake Larson and Bart Borden report to Lyle Taggett, an older senior manager who is Director of Operations. Taggett strongly supported the proposal to bring e-mail to Langley, and he frequently preaches about the importance of computer-mediated communications. The computer behind his own desk sits idle, however, with the screen-saver dancing away most of the time; reputedly, the few e-mail messages posted with his name on the “from” line are prepared by his secretary. Some cynics say that his knowledge of e-mail comes more from reading technology features in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* than from hands-on computer experience. Yet no one disputes Taggett’s reputation as the firm’s most outspoken advocate for

technology, the man who made things happen. Currently, the grapevine whispers that he will announce his retirement soon, some saying that Taggett's real passion is now golf and remarking that his conversations are sprinkled with allusions to "long drives" and "missed putts."

The eight members of your team, the Yokohama Group, are frequently dispersed around Los Angeles, working several days a week at the Yokohama Industries corporate offices and consulting with Yokohama employees. Langley's e-mail system and the Internet are accessed by modem from the computers in all the Yokohama offices used by Langley employees. Your project team now uses e-mail many times a day to communicate with clients and with Langley employees. Members transmit information and send out queries to people at all levels in the organization, as well as at Yokohama; research, create, modify, and review documents; discuss problems in depth; set up schedules and meetings; distribute action plans; and arrange sessions with clients. E-mail has improved your team's efficiency by eliminating telephone tag, cutting back on travel between offices, and getting all the group members involved in significant matters quickly. Just recently, e-mail was the critical element in keeping all the pieces together when your group produced an expanded parts catalog on time and under budget for the supplier Nippon Kobayashi.

Members of the Yokohama Group also frequently communicate by e-mail with other project team members, both individually and in groups, especially the people in Bart Borden's Domestic Group, whose friendly nickname is the *Barracudas*. In fact, over the last few months, members of both groups have been using e-mail to plan social events as well as work activities, occasionally arranging Friday evening parties and weekend get-togethers.

Forwarding a Surprising E-mail Message

On Tuesday, September 16, everyone in the Yokohama Group receives an e-mail from Gus Garcia, a likable "jock" from the Barracudas. The Barracudas are challenging the Yokohamas to a volleyball tournament on Saturday, September 27, at Hermosa Beach. The message from Gus describes all the details of what sounds more like a party than an athletic encounter—where, when, food, drinks, equipment, and more. Soon afterward, e-mail responses are flying thick and fast

from people on both project teams, including copies to everyone, confirming who's coming, what folks are bringing, and joking about whether "Barracuda Bart" should be invited to the event.

But on Thursday, September 18, the fun stops abruptly. It seems that late Wednesday Bart Borden sent an e-mail to his Domestic Group (that is, the Barracudas) that stunned the members. Gus Garcia forwarded the message to the Yokohamas—with the comment: "FYI—thought this might interest you guys" (see Figure 1, p. 179).

Within no time, you and your fellow members in the Yokohama Group have ceased discussing the Hermosa Beach party on e-mail and instead are talking on the telephone and face-to-face about Bart's e-mail to the Domestic Group. Several members express shock that Bart would admit to secretly monitoring employees' e-mail; some react sharply to his assumption that social conversation is forbidden on Langley's e-mail system; one attacks what she considers to be his overreaction to the volleyball get-together. Nobody uses e-mail to discuss the issue of Bart's message charging abuse of the system because, as several note, they wonder whether Jake Larson is monitoring their messages.

Responding to the Threat

That Friday evening after work, you and your Yokohama Group members gather for some end-of-the-week relaxation at a favorite spot a short drive from Langley's offices. Soon the business chatting turns to next weekend's volleyball game, followed by more serious conversation about Bart Borden's e-mail to the Domestic Group.

"I suspect Bart Borden is attempting to set a precedent for the company policy that was never developed when the e-mail system was installed," one says.

Another member replies, "I agree. It's been obvious for some time that we need a policy, but not the kind of policy he has in mind! Unfortunately, this gives him the opportunity to push for tough rules against social use and to show the need for direct supervisory monitoring of messages. Once he gets all the group managers lined up behind his all-work, no-play measures, he'll approach upper management with his proposal for formulating company policy."

"I can't believe how boldly he referred to his 'review' of employees' e-mail, as if it's perfectly acceptable!" says one sarcastically.

“Yeah. That monitoring really blew me away,” adds someone else. “Bart made it sound like all the managers are reading their *direct reports*’ messages as a matter of course. I can’t believe that Jake Larson is reading our e-mail, can you?”

“It’s a gloomy prospect,” nodded another. “We’ll have no privacy if Bart has his way. E-mailing around here will be like ‘big brother is watching you.’ The problem is that Jake Larson and the other group leaders tend to defer to Bart Borden on technology issues. They aren’t all that interested really, so since he wants to play guru, he gets his way much of the time.”

“Well, unfortunately,” adds someone else, “Borden is on firm legal ground with his remarks about the e-mail system belonging to Langley. The company has every right to monitor our e-mail.”

“Many Fortune-500 firms have e-mail systems that automatically inform employees that the company reserves the right to monitor their messages,” says another voice. “And smaller companies are jumping in to protect themselves by getting employees to sign a statement that they’ve read the company policy and know that their e-mail may be monitored. In fact, just the other day I read the policy from a manufacturing firm where my brother works. You wouldn’t believe what that policy allowed the company to do—monitor any e-mail for any purpose whatsoever without employees’ prior notice, knowledge, or permission.”

“That’s true,” chimes in another voice. “Legally, e-mail isn’t protected like the telephone. Nor is a company’s e-mail system legally protected from eavesdropping like the public networks of commercial services. Yet it’s still up to the company to decide how to act. The law allows them to play ‘big brother’ and snoop on our e-mail if they wish, but management can take the high road and treat us with respect, unless it’s a case of a court order or subpoena, of course.”

“Frankly, I’m appalled that American companies can snoop on their employees’ e-mail,” another comments. “There are some countries—like Finland—where the populace is more wired than here, but management doesn’t monitor e-mail.”

“Whether or not management regularly monitors our messages, they have the capability—even after you delete your files—and it can be quite tempting, I’m sure,” suggests someone else. “Some systems operator could be looking at your mail and not saying a word until

you happen to tell your friend a slightly shady joke or mention what a horror the boss was that day. Then, suddenly, you find out that your e-mail hasn't been as private as you thought it was."

"That's why we need a policy spelling things out, telling us exactly what the rules are on social use and whether our messages will be reviewed and, if so, by whom," declares another person. "The worst thing is not knowing who is looking at what—though I must say that being monitored by your immediate boss probably beats anything."

"I've read several news stories this past year about employees being fired for what they've said on e-mail," notes another. "But then some of them said awful things about other races or women."

"Let's not get waylaid here," one man says sternly. "Monitoring is awful because it destroys morale."

"I think attempting to limit 'social use' in a business where you deal with clients is just as bad," challenges another. "If I strike up a friendly chat with my client before getting down to business, is Bart going to declare one paragraph in my e-mail off-limits? He must be crazy."

"Frankly, I think there's another reason for Bart Borden's attack," someone says. "I heard that he was quite upset about Sally Erickson—you know, she was recently promoted to the Detroit office. While Sally still worked for Bart, she sent a couple of messages to upper management without getting clearance from him. The worst of it is that Taggett liked her suggestions and let both Sally and Bart know it."

"So Bart Borden felt threatened, right?" a voice says mockingly. "Some smart folks have found that e-mail can be a pipeline to the top, without going through him!"

"Well, nobody expected Langley Communications to be like Microsoft where the CEO invites anyone in the company to e-mail him," says another. "Still, things are changing here. E-mail is loosening up the rules on who can talk to whom."

"Listen," interrupts someone, "the important thing is that we make sure that Bart Borden's ideas don't become standard procedure around here. We must get to Jake before he joins up on Bart's side of this question. We need to figure out what might bring Jake around to seeing that, no matter what the law is, reading folks' messages and unduly restricting the use of e-mail are not what Langley should be

doing. That's not the way to develop employees' loyalty. A lot of great companies know that, as one look at their e-mail policies shows."

"Well, we need to try to influence Jake Larson's thinking about e-mail policy in several ways," adds someone else, "without embarrassing him about his lack of knowledge. Not only did using e-mail for both work and fun bring all of us up-to-speed on it quickly, but our frequent messaging has made us into a more tightly knit group. Maybe if we open up the subject with Jake, getting him to think about the pros and cons, we could bring him around to our point of view."

"In my opinion," interjects one woman, "we need to get Jake to sit down and discuss the issue of e-mail policy with our whole group."

"No," frowns a guy, shaking his head. "We just need to communicate a few things to him so that he can have a chance to reflect on the issues before Bart Borden starts proposing his rigid rules as Langley's official e-mail policy."

"We can't even agree on what to do, much less on how to do it," says a quiet voice.

Several members nod silently, and someone asks, "Now what?"

bart.borden@langley.com
01:43 PM 09/18/00
Return-Path: <bart.borden@langley.com>
From: bart.borden@langley.com
Date: Thur, 18 Sept 00 13:43:47
To: <domestic.team@langley.com>
Subject: Abuse of Company E-mail System

In my review of the department's e-mail, I have found that Domestic Group members are using the system in an unprofessional manner. Specifically, members have been sending messages for non-business purposes, even setting up sports events and arranging parties. Such recreational use undermines e-mail as a legitimate means of company communication. Moreover, such unofficial use of e-mail interferes with company business, lessens productivity, and represents an abuse of company property.

Langley's e-mail system belongs to the company. It should be used for company business only.

Figure 1. Bart Borden's E-mail Message to Domestic Project Team Members

Assignments

In preparing any of the first four assignments, assume the role of a member of the Yokohama Group at Langley Communications and work with others designated to be members of your team. (Assignments 2 and 3 are alternative tasks, not sequential ones.) In addition to the information provided in the case, you may draw inferences from the case data and from your own knowledge of e-mail and business, but do not make up any information. The last assignment (which requires some research) asks you to assume the role of a member of an E-mail Policy Task Force at Langley.

Assignment 1: Communication Strategy

Given the recent e-mail incident at Langley, plan a communication strategy to address the situation and accomplish the Yokohama Group's goals. Describe the communications you would initiate, noting the purpose, audience, message, and media choice for each, explaining why the specific medium and type (genre) of communication is most appropriate. Present your plan in a memo for the instructor or in a brief extemporaneous talk (using a flip chart) for the class.

Assignment 2: E-mail and Meeting

Prepare an e-mail for Jake Larson, Manager of the Yokohama Group, to request a meeting with the Yokohama Group to discuss your members' concerns about e-mail. Prepare a strategy and plan for meeting with him to accomplish your objectives regarding e-mail policy at Langley. Role-play the meeting with Jake Larson.

Assignment 3: Persuasive Memo

Collaboratively prepare a memo from the Yokohama Group to communicate your members' concerns about e-mail to Jake Larson, Manager of the Yokohama Group. Consider that Larson may pass your memo on to Lyle Taggett, Director of Operations.

Assignment 4: Draft of Memo

Collaboratively prepare a draft of a memo to argue why Langley Communications should develop an *acceptable use* e-mail policy. For this assignment, assume that Jake Larson has discussed the Barracuda incident with your Yokohama Group. Although Larson has not indi-

cated his views on e-mail monitoring or social use, he agrees that Langley needs to institute an e-mail policy. To initiate this effort, Larson suggests that your Yokohama Group should prepare a draft memo to him focusing on Langley's need for the e-mail policy, a draft that he may use in communicating with Lyle Taggett, Director of Operations.

Assignment 5: Draft of Key Components of E-mail Policy

Assume the role of a member of an E-mail Policy Task Force at Langley. Develop key components of an *acceptable use* e-mail policy for Langley Communications and draft the relevant sections of the policy to submit to Lyle Taggett, Director of Operations.

To prepare this assignment, assume that Jake Larson has contacted Taggett about your Yokohama Group's uncertainties over e-mail after Bart Borden's Barracuda incident. As a result of Larson's discussions, Taggett has decided to get an e-mail policy established before he retires and has appointed a task force with employees of all levels at Langley, including you from the Yokohama Group. Discuss possibilities for such an e-mail policy with the other members of the E-mail Policy Task Force and determine which key issues your group will address. Research e-mail policies for acceptable use in business, collecting samples of policies to help prepare a policy draft for Langley.