

Communication and Research Administration: CASE OF NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY IN QATAR By Liz Lance

A recent article in the New Yorker (Heller, 2017) dives into emails—hundreds of thousands of emails. After Enron collapsed in the early 2000s, a federal commission released hundreds of thousands of the corporation’s emails. In the ensuing years, more than 3,000 academic research papers have referenced the released emails, and Heller (2017) notes an interesting shift in how researchers looked at the dataset over time. Researchers began by analyzing the emails to learn about the individuals that wrote the messages, but later analysis shifted instead to focus on what could be learned about the corporation as a whole. It was a movement from “the cult of authorship. . .to the cult of the commons” (Heller, 2017, para. 7).



Photo: www.qatar.northwestern.edu/life/index.html

For better or for worse—I lean toward *for worse*—most of my communication with colleagues takes place over email. The time difference between our Midwestern and Middle East campuses explains why I email my Evanston colleagues (though this is hardly a justification for every email sent among Doha-based colleagues, who are at most a staircase away). The compliance regulations for our primary funder require that questions about awards be resolved through the written record of an online ticketing system, rather than a phone call. Moreover, the ease of asynchronous communication with a faculty member who may or may not be working from home or in the classroom at any given moment leads to even more .eml files for the archive.

One could easily look at a pattern in emails from a senior administrator and link their brief and fast emails with a *Sent from my iPhone* sig-

nature to their packed schedules. However, what does a body of emails to and from multiple people within an organization, or more broadly, within a specific cultural context (primarily expatriate university faculty and staff operating in Qatar) tell us? “When inboxes are gathered, cracked open, and studied,” Heller (2017) writes, “they become a searchable, sortable atlas for the contours of our social minds” (para. 3).

An admittedly unscientific dive into my own email inbox *and* outbox reveals several patterns, which I outline here not simply for their revelatory value, but more importantly, for their communication value.

First, pretty much everyone *except* Americans are exceedingly formal and polite in their email communication in Qatar. Emails often begin not just with *Dear*, but with *Dear Respected*, and titles are routinely used alongside a first name,

such as *Dr. Darius* or *Ms. Meg*. Additionally, emails are often peppered with variations of the word *kind*: *Kindly be reminded*, *kind regards*, and *we kindly request*, for example. I’ll admit that if I were in a strictly American context, I would roll my eyes at the obsequiousness of my correspondents, but in as diverse a cultural context as the one we all work in, and the tone-deafness inherent to the email medium, I not only understand the overreliance on formality, but I now also champion it! If you take the email medium at face value—which is an effective communication technique in and of itself—then better to be too polite and honorific, than not enough.

Second, more often than not, an email correspondent will include a pleasantry or additional salutation before digging into the business at hand. *I hope you are enjoying your summer* precedes *We need to resolve the outstanding*

issue of invoicing on your subaward. While my American instincts would skip that initial pleasantry, I've begun to quite enjoy that part of the correspondence. It serves as a written pause, a metaphorical deep breath that offers restorative power and reminds us of our lives outside of the workplace. With as much time as any one of us spends staring at our Outlook interfaces, that reminder is well received.

Third, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, organization is not highly valued in written email communication, which I attribute to two factors. Writing well is not a skill everyone learns. But *everyone* writes email. In addition, email writers do not look to etiquette cues from formal letter writing, but instead, to speech. And we tend not to consider organization in our spoken communication in the same way we might in our written communication (Lancaster, 2010).

I love sending emails with bulleted lists and multiple paragraph breaks, but I fear those nuances fall on deaf eyes, as responses won't follow the same organizational structure or perhaps they ignore certain points altogether. It can be easy to simply bemoan the correspondent's email inequities, but that doesn't contribute to the ultimate goal of effective communication. Instead of sending one email containing multiple items, I could instead pick up the phone and begin a conversation by saying, 'There are four specific things I want to discuss.' Though if the list is four items long, an in-person meeting (when feasible) is an even better alternative.

Finally, only Americans use baseball idioms. We really need to cry foul on this practice. English is very idiomatic, of course, but native English speakers tend to forget the cultural specificity of those idioms and that for even a fluent bilingual English speaker, these idioms can really feel like they're coming out of left field.

My biggest takeaway from this exercise has been reexamining the effectiveness of my own email communication. I was trained as a journalist and academic before I shifted into research administration, and I have always assumed my writing skills would continue to be a strength in this new field. Interestingly, the daily communication of email turns out to be an area where this isn't the case. I can (and do, I'll admit) write as many well-organized, researched emails with solid leads and plenty of citations as I want, but the truth is that recipients probably won't read them. Though email is a written medium, it doesn't serve the same purpose as a news article or a scholarly paper, and I need to adapt my technique accordingly. But I'll always begin with, 'I hope you're doing well and enjoying your summer.' ■

References:

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Liz Lance is the research administrator at Northwestern University in Qatar. She oversees pre- and post-award grant portfolios, and manages undergraduate research programs. She also teaches and conducts research on gender and the media. She can be reached at elizabeth.lance@northwestern.edu



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