

CCing boss can create ‘erosion of trust’: U.K. study

Be judicious when deciding who to include in email, say experts

BY JOHN DUJAY

LOOPING a supervisor into an email is the digital equivalent of pointing an accusatory finger at a colleague, according to new research from the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom.

When a supervisor is “always” included by carbon copy (CC), it makes the recipient of the email feel trusted significantly less than those who are randomly allocated to the “sometimes” or “almost never” condition, according to David De Cremer, KPMG professor of management studies at the Judge Business School at the university.

De Cremer and his collaborators conducted a series of six studies, using a combination of experiments and surveys. In the experimental studies, 594 working adults participated, while 345 were included in the surveys.

“To make matters worse, my findings indicated that when the supervisor was copied in often, employees felt less trusted, and this feeling automatically led them to infer that the organizational culture must be low in trust overall, fostering a culture of fear and low psychological safety,” said De Cremer, in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*.

Some people do it in good faith, he said.

“They believe the benefits of transparency and collaboration outweigh the costs of excess emails. What they may not realize is how all this surplus communication is eroding the very goals they seek to support through their excess collaboration.”

Creating mistrust

However, when employees imagined sending emails that always copied the supervisor, they indi-

cated they knew this would reduce the level of trust felt by the recipient much more than when the supervisor was copied in sometimes or almost never, wrote De Cremer.

“This finding suggests that when your co-workers copy your supervisor very often, they may be doing so strategically, as they consciously know what the effect will be on you. From that point of view, our finding that employees receiving emails with the supervisor always CCed reported feeling trusted less by their co-worker may very well carry some truth in it.”

CCing the boss would send the message “I don’t think that you will do what I want you to do without notifying your boss that I am asking you to do it,” said Melissa Gratias, a productivity psychologist based in Savannah, Ga. “It can communicate and create an atmosphere of mistrust.”

It also creates defensiveness and a feeling employees are being watched, said Janet Salopek, president of Calgary-based HR consulting firm Salopek & Associates.

People may question why their boss is being CCed, said Rosalinda Randall, a business etiquette expert in San Francisco.

“If I am receiving an email from a co-worker and their boss or a client, and their boss is CCed, I would initially wonder why.”

Openness pros and cons

Full disclosure can be a laudable goal, but it is not the “Holy Grail that every organization has been waiting for to promote efficiency and collaboration,” wrote De Cremer.

“Such a perception makes employees suspicious that what they say or do can be used against them,

especially when supervisors and higher authorities are included.”

Letting everyone know what is going on is the essence of corporate transparency, but that doesn’t necessarily mean companies need to inform every supervisor or manager of what’s happening minute-by-minute.

“We’re putting too much on our leaders to have them follow these granular conversations, when they probably just need to be informed of the decision that was made,” said Gratias.

“We don’t need that degree of transparency.”

Transparency is critical for trust in senior leadership and management, but using email is a bit lazy, said Bill Howatt, chief research and development officer, workforce productivity, at Morneau Shepell in Toronto.

“The challenge is email is very task-oriented and if you have a long, great big piece of information, many people just delete it.”

An inbox can make a worker feels like she is part of an assembly line when most people just want to get rid of the constant buildup of messages, he said.

“What we end up doing — because we think we need to be a team — we often include everybody and nothing gets done,” said Howatt.

“Email was supposed to be a mechanism to facilitate and expedite communication; it’s not supposed to be communication.”

Too much of a good thing can be overwhelming and annoying, said Randall. “Not everyone needs to be informed or included on everything.”

And if you’re copying somebody new on a long email, that means

they have to scroll all the way down to the bottom, start reading all the way back to the top, and infer what it is you want them to pay attention to, said Gratias.

“The benefits of transparency are often outweighed by the cost of the email overload that over-CCing can cause.”

Waste of time

Most white-collar workers deal with multiple and never-ending emails, which consumes precious time sifting through what is relevant and what is not needed.

“Just managing all that email in your inbox, it’s stressful,” said Salopek.

“A CC can be good for transparency but, again, you need to ask yourself ‘Who needs to know? Who do I need to be transparent to?’ You have to spend the time to read through it all to make sure you’re not missing anything and that takes time.”

This can have a negative effect on the morale of some who are feeling overwhelmed.

“For some teams, it can be disengaging because they have to read through all this material — it’s not relevant, it’s wasting their time, they get frustrated,” said Salopek.

Some employees who are really conscientious will read a lot of these emails, so the CCs create extra work, said Howatt.

“CCing people is often a waste of time because... (people) get engaged in conversations they don’t really need to be in.”

Email overload can generate frustration and “feelings of helplessness” after people receive hundreds of messages each day. Employees end up “only skimming them because

they simply don't have the time to process it all," said Gratiyas.

Best practices of CCing

But CCing isn't all bad, according to Salopek. It can be a "pretty powerful" tool as a "shout-out" to a worker.

"Let's say somebody does a really good job and you want to congratulate them — CCing their manager or supervisor is exactly the right thing to do," she said.

"We coach our people to think about CCing that manager or supervisor because that thank you just goes that much further."

Keeping colleagues up-to-date can be accomplished with a well-placed CC in an email, according to Gratiyas.

"The positive of CCing is when someone has specifically asked to be kept in the loop on something."

It is important to let everyone included know why they are being included.

"I recommend that for whom-ever you have on the CC line, that you reference them by name in the body of the email so they know what information you specifically

wanted them to pay attention to," said Gratiyas.

Instead of sending messages all the time, a best practice for employers might be to combine them in a different format.

"We can still be transparent and keep people in the loop by sending a summary report at the end of the day or the end of the week saying, 'These are all the things that happened,'" said Gratiyas.

"You can deal with five issues in that one sitting, rather than copying them on 15 different emails."

It is sensible to have a daily or weekly status report email that ideally is kept in a drafts folder, with bullet points added to it, and then the message is sent out at the end of the day or week.

"You can send one email to them that they will actually pay attention to, rather than 30 that they are barely going to look at and they are most likely going to be annoyed by," said Gratiyas.

To manage the load, it's important to have a dialogue with the team as to when a supervisor wants to be CCed, said Salopek.

"Set up some parameters around

copying and set the ground rules (so) there are no surprises because you have had the conversation," she said. "It would be incumbent upon organizations and HR departments to talk about the culture of email usage."

People are simply operating on the assumption they should copy their manager all the time, said Gratiyas. "We need to combat that with open and honest communication training about the culture of email usage. Can we all agree that we are thankful to one another without ever replying all with the word thanks?"

HR's role

For HR departments, email training can help to streamline and better manage employee time spent sifting through email.

"The role that HR plays is basically coaching our managers and coaching our employees on effective communication: When and when not to copy on an email is part of effective communication," said Salopek.

"(HR) can play a key role in coaching."

If there's an expectation, there's a deliverable and that person on the other end who is being CCed needs to know what that deliverable is and you would want to CC them, said Salopek.

In constructing a communication and training program around using the CC field, it's important to tell workers to use it when they have been asked specifically to copy someone on a chain of emails, said Gratiyas.

"Use it when you want to follow up on someone's specific request that you do something, but they don't necessarily have an action item to perform in the email."

When considering whether or not to CC someone into an email, clarity counts.

"If I were an HR person giving out instructions I would say, 'Be intentional (and) understand why you are including certain people on emails, and if there is another, more appropriate method of communicating with that person — (instead of) having them be copied on a back-and-forth chain of 20 emails — have them use the other method,'" said Gratiyas.