

E-Mail: The Most Used, Least Effective Communications Tool

Written by Bob Williamson
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Working with many different types of manufacturing facilities seeking improvement programs around North America proves to be most insightful. We have been working with several locations to improve communications about equipment and process reliability and have discovered why some preventive maintenance (PM) programs fail. The answer lies somewhere in the use of e-mail or electronic mail systems as a communications tool. Here is the scenario.

For several years now e-mail has grown rapidly as a communications tool in XYZ Company. At one plant location they are well into e-mail and a two-year planned, preventive, and total productive maintenance implementation process. We were asked to look at the question of “how to improve communications that will result in improved plant reliability and performance.”

Communications methods at this plant typically included large and small meetings, one-on-one discussions, signs, posters, a plant newsletter, and e-mail. The most often cited and used communications method was e-mail, hands down. Everyone we met with spoke of the virtues and the effectiveness of e-mail. The advantages they cited included speed, mass distribution if needed, ease of getting a reply, and the ability to save time by not having to arrange meetings to communicate about specific topics.

Here is the downside of e-mail in this plant location. At first there was little awareness of any limitation. But the closer we got to the people on the plant floor—maintenance, operations, supervision—the more we saw a completely different side on the effectiveness of e-mail. What were the real world findings in this plant? Clearly 70 percent of the employees did not have access to e-mail. This was the plant floor group. Next, even if they did have access to e-mail, approximately 30 percent of the workforce could not read or write above the seventh grade level (the level of basic adult literacy). Of the 70 percent, only a small number of them had computer skills (typically related to games on a home computer).

The answer to this e-mail communications gap? The first-line supervisors were made accountable for reading, and printing out, e-mails that were relevant to their work group and seeing that the messages are communicated to everyone who needs to know. Well, you can imagine how many e-mails are distributed daily at this plant. And, you can imagine how little time the supervisors had to spend reading all those e-mails looking for items that should be communicated to their work groups. Supervisors told us “there has to be a better way!”

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To address the supervisors' concerns, we looked at a number of critical communications that went out via e-mail. We found a number of dysfunctional features. First, beyond the junk e-mail we found that the "subject" line told little of the message's importance. Second, the opening paragraph did not summarize what the message was but rather began building the reader up to learn more as he or she read on. The text of the message was typically written at the twelfth grade level and higher in very long lines of text and paragraphs. And, the very last line tended to be "Make sure this subject gets communicated to those employees in your area who do not have e-mail access."

So, what is the bottom line for improving communications in ways that lead to improved plant reliability and performance? First, do not assume that just because you sent an e-mail that you have communicated. The chances are you have not communicated at all to the very people who need to understand the message and take action. Make sure there is a formal communications structure in place to bridge the gap between those who have e-mail access and those who do not. Write e-mails that speak to the readers' reading and writing levels. Make the subject a specific action statement. Specify who needs to hear this message in the opening paragraph. The lead paragraph should be a very brief summary of the entire e-mail message. Lastly, use short sentences, bullet lists, and specific action statements whenever possible. Do not ramble on.

Oddly enough, we have noticed some of the same barriers to effective PM programs as we noted for e-mail. Many PMs are not understood, and not used as intended, because they do not communicate to the end user as effectively as they should. Our suggestion: Many of the same guidelines for e-mail effectiveness will likely result in more effective PMs in your plant. In the information age, communications will be a fundamental, underlying, key to plant and equipment reliability. **MT**