ARTICLE

Well-being and virtual interactions at work: Interacting how we want

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Introduction

Due to advances in technology and the globalisation of activities, an increasing number of employees now virtually interact in organisations. And yet virtual interactions remain frightening and misunderstood. Recently, tech giants such as Yahoo! and Hewlett Packard took the radical decision of banning telework. Yahoo! HR lead declared that "*to become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side*".

Interactions within the workplace are often considered to be more pleasant and efficient when carried out face-to-face. Indeed, how could employees take a friendly coffee break if not face-to-face? How could employees be friendly to one another and efficient if they are absorbed by their screens in their quiet open space?

These questionings often forget a crucial part of virtual interactions – the employees themselves. Instead of trying to find a 'one size fits all' answer, I intend to show that in the context of virtual interactions, "*some individuals thrive in this environment whereas others suffer*" (Macik-Frey, Quick, & Nelson, 2007, p. 823). This paper presents both quantitative and qualitative data from my research. I then suggest practical interventions or exercises that can be done by practitioners to make individuals around them happier using virtual interactions at work.

Virtual interactions at work

Most past research on virtual interactions at work has been focusing on trying to establish a link between an amount of interactions and well-being. The impact of the amount of emails on overload is frequently discussed. However, some authors have rightfully suggested that emails could very well be both sources and symbols of stress (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011). This means that although emails created stressors of their own, they also "*distracted people from recognizing other sources of overload in their work lives*" (2011, p. 887). Tensions and debates crystallised around emails perhaps to an undue extent. More importantly, this suggests that individuals' perceptions of emails might have stronger consequences on well-being than emails themselves.

Another focus of past and current literature has been on virtual teams and teleworkers. These workers greatly depend on virtual interactions such as emails, video conferences, instant messages or enterprise social networks. However, these specific circumstances forget that "*everyone experiences virtual work to some extent*" (Wang & Haggerty, 2011, p. 306) and employees can virtually interact even while being in the same building or in a common open space.

My research thus focuses on all employees virtually interacting to some extent or even not at all. It also intends to include individuals' perceptions of their virtual interactions.

INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTIONS OF EMAILS MIGHT HAVE STRONGER CONSEQUENCES ON WELL-BEING THAN EMAILS THEMSELVES

How many virtual interactions are enough?

To investigate these issues, I conducted a study in which I surveyed 118 U.S. employees from a Qualtrics online sample (Qualtrics, 2015) and interviewed 23 employees from a large French multinational IT company. The results were striking.

I not only asked these individuals how much they were using various media such as emails, instant messaging, video conferencing, but also how much they would like to use these media in their jobs. I also assessed their well-being using the widely used ASSET tool (Robertson Cooper Ltd, 2015) which explores dimensions such as work relationships, control or workload as well as physical and mental health.

When I tried to link individuals' volumes of virtual interactions to their well-being, the results were inconclusive in most cases. For example, the actual volume of emails was surprisingly unrelated to well-being, meaning that high amounts of emails were not causing any stress or damaging any relationship.

The results got significant and more interesting once I added the desired volumes of virtual interactions and ran the Person-Environment fit analyses (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Stich, 2014), as shown in Figure 1. The surface maps both actual and desired volumes of emails. Its height represents stress coming from poor relationships with colleagues.

The bottom right corner shows individuals who used emails a lot but did not want to use them at all. They experienced high relationship stress.

Similarly, the top left corner shows individuals who did not use emails at all but would have liked to use them a lot, and they also experienced high relationship stress. On the contrary, the diagonal running from bottom left to top right shows individuals who use emails to the extent they desire. These employees were the ones experiencing the lower levels of relationship stress.

Figure 1: The impact of actual and desired volumes of emails on relationship stress
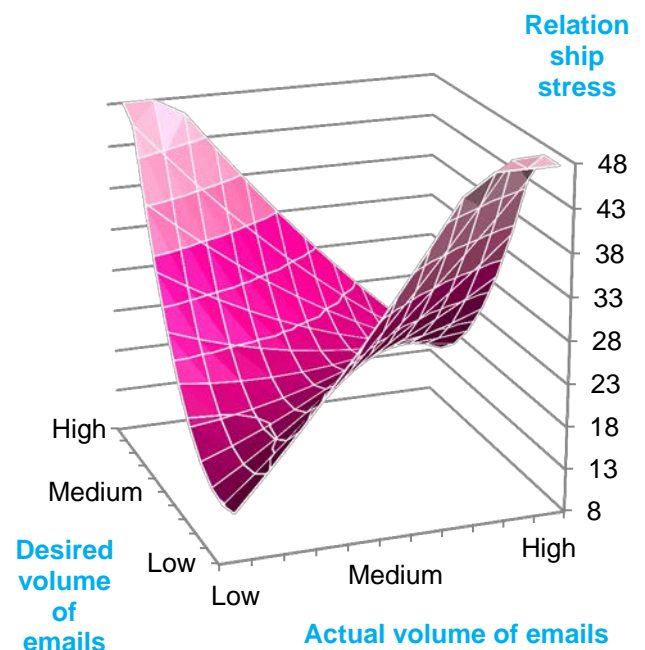
What can be concluded from Figure 1 is that relationship stress increases as employees interact to an extent they do not want. It also decreases as their actual and desired volumes of virtual interactions converge. Similar patterns have been found for the impact of emails on negative emotions, job control stress and job conditions stress.

This suggests that looking at the amount of virtual interactions (e.g., emails sent or received) without considering employees' perceptions of this amount is thus unlikely to answer the question "How many virtual interactions are enough?" The implications of this finding are now discussed, illustrated with quotes from the interviews of the study.

The fit of one can be the misfit of another

Individuals can thus experience higher levels of well-being when they interact in a way they want to. In other terms, they want to experience a fit between their actual and preferred interactions. Although I occasionally talk or send emails to myself, interactions usually involve several correspondents. The fit of one could therefore be the misfit of another. Take the example of this employee:

> *"I limit my phone calls a lot. I never call. I don't like the phone, I don't know why [laughs]. I don't like it, and I don't like it either when I am called."*

On the other hand, another employee said:

> *"I am more of a phone person. […] I send an instant message with 'hey, do you have a minute?" and if they say yes, I call them straight away. I think people have identified me as someone who calls [laughs]."*

Fortunately, these two employees were not working in the same team. It is indeed obvious from these quotes that misfit can emerge from conflicting media preferences. The latter employee would constantly call the former despite his dislike for phone calls. This problem would have escalated as the former never expressed his preferences to anyone and the latter "*never met anyone who disliked the phone*" and even thought people were always pleased with his calls.

Understanding one's own media preferences and those of others

The implications of this finding is that one should be able to spot the media preferences of colleagues or at least express his own. "*It is about understanding the organisational culture and adapting the medium to the person*", as coined by one interviewee. Identifying one's own preferences requires self-reflection: Which media do I prefer? Which do I dislike? How much is enough for me? Sharing them with your colleagues might take courage, but it is worth the trouble. Finally, understanding the media preferences requires empathy. One interviewee rightfully observed:

> *"I have been using these technologies for a very long time. They have become so natural that it is sometimes hard for me to realize that they might not be as natural to others."*

This empathy is particularly important for "*the successful incorporation of valuable, technophobic personnel*" (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998, p. 19) who suffer even more from the overuse of technology (Schumacher & Morahan-Martin, 2001).

In case the media preferences within the team are conflicting too much, a manager could as a last resort decide to group members by media preferences. In these circumstances of "*supplementary fit*", the well-being of each team member is improved if he or she "*supplements, embellishes or possesses characteristics which are similar to other individuals*" (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 269).

The cost of not listening to media preferences

The survey data only presented the impact of virtual misfit having an influence on well-being, but the outcomes of well-being itself are well documented in literature. Not only can employee well-being improve morale and motivation, it can also increase productivity and performance or even reduce sickness absences (Robertson & Cooper, 2011) across industries (Stacey, 2010).

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> **INDIVIDUALS CAN THUS EXPERIENCE HIGHER LEVELS OF WELL-BEING WHEN THEY INTERACT IN A WAY THEY WANT TO**
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The interview data further unveiled the potential impact of virtual fit on turnover intentions. Indeed, the fit between actual and desired amounts of virtual interactions also partly explained why some individuals changed jobs or organisations. One interviewee reflected:

> *"I think I have something that satisfies me. But I have sought this throughout my work life, so I have not arrived here by chance [smile]. […] I arrived into a satisfying job in which I can find those things. And I had other unsatisfying jobs in which I had like 45 or 50 e-mails per day, so…"*

These reasons for career change are also well discussed among academics studying how individuals fit to their jobs or to their organisations (Kristof, 1996).

Tailoring organisational policies

As seen from these results, forcing employees to virtually interact to an extent they do not want might damage their well-being. This means that "*strategies aimed at simply reducing email volume and changing individual behaviours may not be enough*" (Sumecki, Chipulu, & Ojiako, 2011, p. 413). Banning telework and forcing everyone to interact face-to-face in an open space office might thus damage the well-being of those employees who do not value face-to-face interactions this much, as exemplified in this transcript:

> *"The open space bothers me because I know I would work better from home. There is noise and people inviting me to coffee breaks. So for me it is not the quietest way to think my ideas through."*

As a result, this person frequently put on headphones to display her unavailability, which is not unlike individuals adopting a "*Do Not Disturb*" status on instant messaging systems.

To avoid these unwanted results, organisations could "*consider tailoring organisational policies regarding IT use to individual-specific traits*" (Tarafdar, D'Arcy, Turel, & Gupta, 2015, p. 69). Although future research will need to identify how personality can impact the relationship between virtual interactions and well-being, organisations could at least tailor their policies to their employees' media preferences. By surveying their employees with tools such as Qualtrics or ASSET (Robertson Cooper Ltd, 2015), organisations could find out about their expectations in terms of media use and how these impact on their well-being. Perhaps they might say that they would like fewer emails and more instant messages or posts on the internal social network. Or perhaps even the opposite. Try not to push unpopular media, as it might create misfits and resistance, ultimately damaging well-being among your employees.

Short vacations from emails

Engaging interventions could also be made in order to adjust employees' perceptions of virtual interactions. Prof Sir Cary Cooper (also supervising the present research) conducted an experiment for ITV in which emails were banned in a small organisation for a week (Morgan, 2012). Employees became involved and enthusiastic, bonded and ultimately changed their use of emails long after emails came back to their office. In academic research, the same experiment has been conducted in a small portion of a larger organisation. During the week without emails, participants were less stressed, more focused on background tasks and interacted more face-to-face even with colleagues located in different buildings (Mark, Voida, & Cardello, 2012).

ONE WEEK VACATION […] COULD PROVE TO BE AN INTERESTING TEAM BUILDING AND SELF-REFLECTIVE EXERCISE TO IMPROVE MORALE AND WELL-BEING.

Participants also changed the way they perceived emails, as most of them have never known a time in which they were not sending or receiving any. These interventions can thus "*promote a culture with a high perception of email as a business critical tool*" (Sumecki et al., 2011, p. 413), which in turn can foster more positive views on emails.

Banning or imposing media use for a longer period of time would be unwise, as it would create misfit and thus stress for individuals who do not agree with such policy. The '*phone person*' mentioned before would obviously be annoyed by phones being replaced by instant messages.

One week vacation from emails being short enough, such long term misfit would not arise. Instead, the experiment could prove to be an interesting team building and self-reflective exercise to improve morale and well-being. It could be followed by group discussions raising awareness about the media preferences of one another.
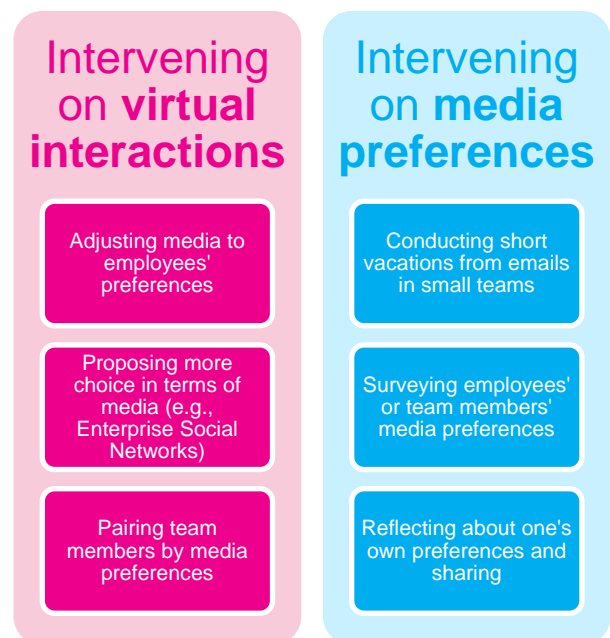
Conclusions and lessons to be learned

As academics, we are still pondering the impacts of emails, which have been around long enough. Organisations have already started to replace or supplement them with newer media such as instant messages or Enterprise Social Networks. Although little is still known about these media from an academic point of view, my research suggests an intuitive yet robust framework which could be applied to any of those media.

As practitioners, "*we must be vigilant in assessing the human costs that are incurred when these advances are adopted in the workplace*" (Mark et al., 2012, p. 10). Throughout this paper I suggested exercises, surveys and interventions that could be conducted within one's organisation, one's team or even oneself.

The important learning to take away from my paper is that there is no '*one size fits all*' answer to the debate on the impact of virtual interactions at work. Some employees thrive using certain media while others suffer. And some do not even care. Acknowledging this is a first step to become more empathetic towards those who are virtually interacting in a different way. This is more than needed in the unstoppable train of technological innovations.

Figure 2: Possible practical interventions

Intervening on **virtual interactions**
- Adjusting media to employees' preferences
- Proposing more choice in terms of media (e.g., Enterprise Social Networks)
- Pairing team members by media preferences

Intervening on **media preferences**
- Conducting short vacations from emails in small teams
- Surveying employees' or team members' media preferences
- Reflecting about one's own preferences and sharing

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Jean-François's thesis is about *Well-Being and Virtual Interactions at Work* and is supervised by Dr Patrick Stacey, Prof Cary L. Cooper and Prof Monideepa Tarafdar. His research interests gravitate around the psychological impacts of technology on employees, covering areas such as technostress, telecommuting, virtual teams or E-leadership. Before beginning his PhD at Lancaster University Management School, he studied at Aston Business School and EDHEC Business School (France) and worked in information systems and R&D departments in the video game industry. His articles on the future of work and technology were published in *HR Magazine* or won first and second prizes in journalism contests organised by *Le Monde* and *Orange S.A.* He was also an invited expert on the webinar *Building Trust in Your Virtual Team* by *PlayPrelude* and *Collaboration Superpowers*. More information about his research can be found on his personal website jfstich.com.