

Organising Information and Procedures for Effective Communication across Multinational Campuses

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Abstract

The Faculty of Informatics and Communication at Central Queensland University (CQU) is well known for providing a quality product and service to its customers. CQU's central campus is located in Rockhampton. CQU operates within a complex tertiary environment, and offers its programs and courses from a multitude of campuses around the world.

The organization of information and procedures that define the way in which the Faculty does business is a complicated process that requires a high level of interaction between staff and associated partners. Communicating through email is convenient; however, it can be ineffective if it is not understood correctly and completely at the receiving end. This paper presents an overview of how the Faculty of Informatics and Communication operates in a complicated tertiary environment and how it uses different communication tools to effectively coordinate the delivery of its educational product and is able to build relationships with remote campuses.

Keywords: Electronic Communication, Effective Communication, Email, Information Technology, Multinational Environment

Introduction

Australian universities are increasingly being forced to operate within a commercial environment due to financial constraints placed upon them. Reduction in staffing has also added pressures, as government funding is reduced and other ways of increasing revenue have been explored. Australian universities can no longer sustain their core business without the assistance of commercial ventures. These commercial sites administer programs at many locations, and are responsible for the delivery of the educational product and service. "More than 200 000 foreign fee-paying students are expected to enrol in Australian education institutions this year, with well over 100 000 studying onshore at university" (Maslen, 2002). Central Queensland University (CQU) has embarked on the challenge of generating revenue through creating partnerships with commercial ventures. At present CQU is at the stage where it can effectively deliver its product to both Australian and overseas students through its extensive network of campus and technological infrastructure.

CQU is the fastest growing regional university in Australia and has become widely known for providing a quality product and service to its customers. The Faculty of Informatics and Communication (Infocom)

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was formed in January 1998, after CQU underwent an organizational restructure. This new Faculty brought together disciplines from the areas of Information Technology, Communication, Mathematics and Health Informatics.

As Infocom was the first faculty of its kind in Australia, there were high expectations of the ability of staff to deliver its educational programs to several

campuses including Rockhampton (CQU's main administrative campus) Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Mackay, Emerald, Gladstone, Bundaberg, Hong Kong, Singapore and more recently at new sites located in Fiji, the Gold Coast and Malaysia. Infocom took on this challenge and has been able to effectively coordinate the delivery of its programs to the abovementioned sites. This is not to say it has been done without experiencing some discomfort along the way. There have been some mountains to climb before being able to ride the smooth technological highway, and each hill conquered has contributed to how Infocom operates today.

In 1998 the University as a whole was still relatively new at operating within a commercial environment. The newly born Faculty of Informatics and Communication was forced to operate with people from disciplines that had never before worked together, whilst also being able to run an efficient operation from various locations around the world. Individuals from the different disciplines had become accustomed to their own way of communicating, and so the marrying of different communication styles had to merge quickly to create a new way of moving ahead cohesively. This was akin to placing a human and a monkey in a room together and expecting them to understand each other. (Who is the human and who is the monkey?) Many new procedures had to be developed and new processes implemented before the Faculty was able to operate smoothly and congruently in an increasingly technological and commercial environment.

Discussion

Transformation of CQU

Is it possible for a University to operate from several sites around the world, yet still be able to deliver a product that is of the same standard and quality to all students? How can the administering of important and valuable information be communicated effectively to ensure that all sites are operating to a consistent plan? These are two of the biggest challenges for the Faculty of Informatics and Communication, which at times have presented some challenging hurdles.

Information and communication technologies are dramatically altering many aspects of economic and social life: production systems, working methods, and relations, the organization of companies, and the way people communicate with each other are under-going changes throughout the world. (Hakkarainen, Muukonen, Lipponen, Ilomaki, Rahikainen & Lehtinen, 2001)

Without face-to-face contact or ever meeting the lecturer, tutor or administrative staff member who may be located at another campus miles away, is it really possible to communicate information so that it can be totally understood at the receiving end? In the following discussion, I hope to elaborate on how this institution (CQU) has attempted to work with these challenges and overcome communication obstacles presented to effectively run their operation.

One decade ago, CQU was relatively small in size when compared to Australia's larger tertiary institutions. Government funds were available so the University could function without interaction with other sources. CQU operated solely within regional Queensland, offering its educational product at campuses located in Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Mackay and Emerald. With campuses clustered relatively close together, and the institution being relatively small in size, individuals were aware of administrative procedures, and the traditional forms of communication such as face-to-face contact and telephone were effectively utilized. Strong working and personal relationships were formed between staff located at each of the campuses, and the transfer of textual information occurred via physical or electronic means (mail, fax, floppy disks).

In 1994, CQU established its first commercial partnership involving full fee paying students by opening a campus in Sydney. Two years later the same process occurred, with a campus commencing operations in Melbourne followed soon after with a campus being located in Brisbane and the opening of Gold Coast

Campus in 2001. To add to the complexity of operations, CQU was also opening campuses in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Fiji. CQU programs are coordinated at these overseas campuses by local staff who undertake full teaching responsibility. With each campus came the added complexity of a new set of people, administration and interactions that had to be absorbed by the staff within Infocom.

It soon became apparent that lecturing staff who coordinated courses had little idea of who the staff were at the other campuses, yet were required to communicate their expectations of teaching standards and procedures using little more than phone calls (if the person can be contacted in this way), or more often than not, via email. This was also mirrored by administrative staff who were also required to organise and communicate important information to key academic and administrative staff members at those campuses. The high turnover of staff at other campuses added to the difficulties associated with forming relationships, and being sure of who was responsible for various duties.

Within a short space of time student numbers increased dramatically (Table 1), as did the number of staff administering courses and programs. However, these numbers did not increase at the same rate. The ratio of student numbers to staff members exploded, and staff operated under difficult circumstances. From Infocom's birth in 1998, student numbers have almost doubled and are continuing to grow.

Year	Total Number of Students Enrolled in Infocom Courses	Per Cent Increase
1998	16 681	Infocom's First Year
1999	18 523	(11% above previous year)
2000	25 783	(39% above previous year)
2001	38 222	(48% above previous year)

Table 1: Increase in Enrolment Figures

This explosion in the number of students enrolling in the Faculty's courses meant the way in which staff were communicating to each other also quickly changed. Suddenly, staff were expected to liaise with "unknown" personnel located at many different campuses situated a great distance from its "home base" in the city of Rockhampton. With the distance between Rockhampton's main administrative campus and its nearest international campus located in Brisbane being over 600 kilometres, face-to-face communication with staff located at other campuses was minimal and quite simply not feasible due to the distance. It was soon ascertained that to travel overseas and interstate to deal with problems or situations arising each week was a costly exercise and one that would be economically unrealistic.

Course Coordinators' roles quickly changed as they were expected to liaise with up to 13 or more lecturers and tutors during the term, thus adding to the difficulty in ensuring the same information has been understood correctly by all of the staff involved. In addition, staff employed at CQU's international and Off-Shore campuses were contracted on a part time basis and did not have access to a full-time office facility. It also became clear that the most vital tool used for communicating information to these part-time staff members was through electronic means such as email or videoconference links.

With the technology age being thrust upon the world at a time of rapid development for CQU, it was expected that technology would be fully utilized, and would be the answer to emerging communication problems. Communication via email was seen to be the quickest and easiest way to transfer information to staff located at the numerous CQU campuses. Teleconferencing technology was also growing rapidly and was implemented at CQU during this time of change. More and more, Infocom appeared to be moving away from its traditional personal and collaborative communication style, as the wave of electronic communication took hold. Face-to-face communication slowly faded away and was now being replaced

by a more “virtual” existence. Informal and formal meetings were replaced by email traffic that before did not exist.

In their paper, Townsend, Hendrickson and DeMarie wrote that “meetings can be thought of as enabling two different processes: They enable administrative activity among co-workers, and they enable social processes essential to effective collaboration” (Townsend, Hendrickson & DeMarie, 2002). Over a period of four years, had the personalised touch disappeared from the culture of Infocom, and the medium for effective collaboration gone with it? With email, videoconference and Internet usage emerging as the main tools for exchanging information, the ability to communicate the same message to a large number of people became a much easier task than it once was. Quick and efficient use of email within the Faculty meant that important course information and administrative procedures could be exchanged within seconds. But are you able to convey the same message without the personal touch that comes with ‘knowing’ the other person with whom you are speaking?

Changing Face of Communication - New Processes Using New Technology

Faculty CD and online materials

In an effort to streamline processes, Infocom moved away from the traditional use of paper-based materials to deliver their product. In 2000, the decision was made to offer students the flexibility of obtaining most of their required course information online via a CD-ROM. Administrative processes and procedures had to be developed so that all 13 campuses would also benefit from this change. Changes included all course materials being prepared further in advance to ensure there was time for them to be burnt onto the CD-ROM.

In her interesting article, Sue Myburgh wrote:

Organizations today face more competition than was the case even a decade ago. A successful business relies on the right combination of organizational resources working together in a dedicated effort to penetrate and achieve leadership in the marketplace, and information is such a resource. (Myburgh, 2002).

By introducing a CD-ROM that contained course information, as well as utilizing the Internet, Infocom was able to compete globally with other universities.

The CD-ROM is prepared months in advance and is sent out to students as part of their study materials package. In addition to this, most of the course information is placed on the Intranet for students to access throughout the term. Infocom’s initiative in ensuring that course information is available via electronic means has meant that all CQU campuses are able to gain immediate access to a central store of information. However, problems are encountered when information burnt on the CD-ROM is found to be incorrect.

Implementation of new programs

From Infocom’s birth in 1998, six new programs have been implemented and offered across 13 campuses including the following:

- Bachelor of Internet Communication;
- Bachelor of Communication and Information Technology;
- Bachelor of Business Administration/Bachelor of Professional Communication;
- Bachelor of Electronic Commerce;
- Graduate Diploma of Electronic Commerce;

- Master of Electronic Commerce.

The development of all six of these programs within a twelve-month time period meant that implementation plans needed to be constructed and effectively communicated to ensure they would run successfully at the other campuses. Information about the new programs was again communicated using electronic communication, to personnel involved at each campus, including management and administrative staff. Meetings were coordinated using videoconference links and teleconference links to supplement the procedural information conveyed via email.

Despite all of the electronic communication efforts, it was discovered early in 2002 that the Bachelor of Business Administration/Bachelor of Professional Communication program that was implemented in 2000 was not being marketed at one of CQU's international campuses. It appeared that although meetings and email correspondence had taken place with key individuals, the information had not been effectively communicated to their marketing staff to ensure the program was advertised to students. Simple dependence on electronic communication to convey crucial information about this program to key personnel had not succeeded in its mission as an information distribution vehicle. It was only when a staff member was present at another campus that this oversight was discovered. Face-to-face communication had been able to prevent further discrepancies occurring in the system.

Need for increased face-to-face communication

Program Administrators are employed at each CQU campus and are responsible for administering program and course information to prospective and enrolled students. There are many rules that students must adhere to and the information given to the students must be communicated correctly and accurately. Any incorrect program advice communicated to the student means the quality of service they receive is reduced. Experience has shown it is difficult to provide students with accurate and up-to-date information. Contributing factors include changing staff members at campuses, the large number of different programs offered and continual updating of rules.

After various problems stemming from the frequent misinterpretation of information, it was decided that, to ensure consistency and accuracy of information, face-to-face orientation sessions were essential. Townsend, Hendrickson and DeMarie commented, "as productive as the telephone may be, it has not supplanted the need for travel -- either down the hall or across the country" (Townsend, Hendrickson & DeMarie, 2002). To assist in the communication of correct procedures to administrative staff at other CQU campuses, training and orientation sessions are scheduled at the commencement of each term. Experienced staff from the Rockhampton campus travel to all international campuses and provide training for new (and continuing) staff in program advice and other administrative processes. This has been extremely beneficial to the successful operation of administrative functions for all staff.

Due to the reliance on communicating via email, difficulties experienced such as a simple instruction being misinterpreted or accidentally ignored by the receiving party can cause significant problems. A case-in-point was when a lecturing staff member at an international campus made use of a course profile that was not to be used during that specific term. This course profile was copied to all students in the course to work on throughout the term. The ramifications of this simple mistake meant that students, located at this campus only, were working to a different study schedule, and submitting different assignments at different due dates, than the rest of the students enrolled in the course. How can 10 other sites have understood there was a new course profile to be used after each term, and one simply not have understood this information?

An email had been sent to the sub-deans at each campus requesting that it be brought to the attention of teaching staff that there are different profiles to be used for the Spring, Summer and Spring/Summer terms. These three terms run simultaneously over the Christmas period and past experience has shown that they can easily be confused, hence the need for a specific email to clarify and confirm the correct pol-

icy. One campus had not passed on the vital information to the staff involved with the delivery of the course, and so the wrong course profile was utilized. Simple reliance on email discussion had failed, where face-to-face communication had succeeded in the past.

Online vs Face-to-Face Communication

In this high-tech world, there is almost no escape from using technology. The staff employed at Infocom are no exception. Staff expect to make use of electronic communication tools to effectively organise their daily work and to communicate with colleagues. Yet are all staff “made” for using technology, or are many being left behind?

Perceptual learning styles are the means by which learners extract information from their surroundings through the use of their five senses. That is, individuals learn from seeing printed or written words, listening, verbalisation, seeing visual depictions, sense of touch or grasp, whole body movement and smell and taste. (Institute for Learning Styles- Overview of the Seven Perceptual Styles, 2001).

With the pace at which the Faculty of Informatics and Communication has grown, there has been relatively little training and preparation for staff to assist them with communicating via electronic technology, apart from ‘on the job’ training. How do staff ‘learn’ to communicate effectively?

In their paper, Liu and Stork state, “New technologies solve problems, but they also create dilemmas involving social, cultural, organizational, and human factors” (Liu & Stork, 2000). With little or no training in how to communicate effectively using electronic technology, those who learn easily through seeing printed or written words may find it easier to understand what words to use in each context. However, what of those who find words are of little help to them, and only learn from seeing depictions, touching or grasping?

On the other hand, for those who found it difficult to use the more traditional means of communication such as speaking through the telephone and participating in face-to-face meetings, this new technology provides an avenue for a more successful way to communicate. To be able to express written words to colleagues via email has meant a new world has opened up for those who cannot express their views easily face-to-face.

Face-to-face communication involves the use of body language, emotion and facial expression to assist the process of one person making another individual understand a message. When sending an email, emotions and body language cannot be seen, and thus communicating a message is simply limited to words. This adds another dimension of challenge to the communication of vital information to commercial partners, and in particular to those located overseas in culturally diverse environments.

In addition to being able to effectively communicate via electronic means, there are increased pressures for staff to respond immediately to requests that are delivered via email. Without the direct feedback received from face-to-face communication that ensures your message has been heard and understood, the sender can be driven to high levels of anxiety waiting to see if somebody at the other end is going to respond.

It is even more difficulty to accurately communicate information to CQU overseas campuses without face-to-face interaction and contact. It is not feasible in Infocom’s everyday operation to travel to and from the campuses located in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Fiji, and so videoconferences, teleconferences and email are the most relied upon tools to effectively communicate administrative changes. Cultural sensitivities must also be taken into account when using only words. Without the assistance of body language and facial expression, the chance of the receiving party accurately understanding the full context of a message is limited. These diversities are catered for with the coordination of information to offshore partners being channeled through one staff member within the Faculty to ensure effective com-

munication. Over time this staff member has been able to learn the idiosyncrasies of each commercial partner and has developed a vocabulary that allows the effective communication of accurate information. Gundling concludes in his paper “Technology such as voicemail and email can make communication easier, but not always. That’s especially true in trying to communicate with clients, team members, or other work groups located in other countries” (Gundling, 1999).

Conclusion

Paragon of communication

The journey has been long and the experiences with electronic communication within Infocom during the past four years have been both positive and negative. New ways of learning to use technology to communicate have been tested. It has emerged that both face-to-face and electronic communication must be implemented together to produce a successful outcome. So what of the future?

Considering all of the newly emerging technologies, perhaps it is the Web Cam that may prove to be the next best communication tool for the Faculty. For individuals who may be strong face-to-face communicators, but not so effective communicating via the written word, the implementation of Web Cam along side existing technologies could provide the best of both worlds. If every staff member were able to utilize Web Cam in their offices, perhaps more effective communication may be able to take place.

In addition to the above, it has been realized that visits to other campuses prove to be overwhelmingly beneficial, and have resulted in less misunderstanding and greater convergence of information. Campuses cannot operate in isolation and will always require face-to-face contact to assist with delivering an effective service to our customers. Retreats and planning sessions where all staff are able to meet and greet each other physically will assist in putting back that personal touch that was once so integral to the culture of the Faculty.

Ensuring Infocom’s operation runs smoothly at all campuses is certainly not an easy task given the need to deal with many different academic and administrative staff members. Reliance upon information submitted via email is extremely high, and email has certainly become the most used communication tool within the organization. This tool has become ingrained in Infocom’s culture, to a point where working without it would be detrimental to the success of the Faculty. Almost all of the exchange of information between staff located at different campuses around Australia and overseas is performed via electronic communication. Videoconference facilities are widely used as part of everyday procedures, particularly with regard to communicating with overseas partners. These two areas of technology have contributed widely to building strong relationships with other staff members.

It has been found that although the latest technology provides for the most efficient use of communication, there have also been some disadvantages. Communicating through a simple email is certainly convenient; however, it has been found to be ineffective and almost detrimental if not understood correctly at the receiving end.

Experience has shown that we cannot do everything using electronic communication alone. However, we certainly cannot do without the electronic communication tools either. When interacting within a complicated working environment with changing paradigms, integrating traditional and electronic means for communication is a vital ingredient in an effective communication process. Townsend, Hendrickson and DeMarie state in their paper “People working together have a need to meet in order to accomplish their mission. The challenge of creating connective richness is to understand the basis of the need to meet and then to replace the face-to-face meeting with an equally viable interaction” (Townsend, Hendrickson & DeMarie, 2002).

There are always some mountains to climb with the introduction of any new technology where human beings are expected to play a role. This paper is an overview of how the Faculty of Informatics and Communication has taken on the challenge of operating in a complicated higher education environment involving staff located across multinational campuses to deliver its educational product. Although the mountains have been difficult at times to conquer, the technological highway is slowly smoothing the ride.

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Biography

Sharon Parr is a student at the Central Queensland University (CQU) in Australia. She is also currently employed at the Faculty of Informatics and Communication and has been a member of the CQU community since 1996. During her time employed at CQU she has undertaken various administrative roles, with her current position being Executive Assistant to the Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning).

The Teaching and Learning office within the Faculty of Informatics and Communication is responsible for all matters related to the management and support of programs offered by the Faculty across all campuses. Sharon Parr forms part of a team of nine support personnel who perform key roles in communicating and liaising with administrative and academic staff members located at CQU's 13 campuses.