

Surviving the Battlefield at Work
20 June 2002

“Netiquette”. I hate that word. I hate it mostly because it is a stupid media and neophyte friendly word that some guy thought he was clever for coming up with. Hell must certainly reach its teeth gnashing effect by incessantly repeating buzz words such as this one over a loud speaker. Despite my hatred of the word, it does represent an important concept. People must relate to each other differently on the net than they do in non-computer facilitated interactions. My limited time as an intern at a bioengineering firm has led me to believe that all business men operating outside of tribal villages in the few spots of the world untouched by electricity should be required to attend mandatory training on interacting in the computer world.

I don't mean the inane training that business men currently receive. Most of the current training covers such important topics as why typing in capital letters may be interpreted as shouting. That's right, most Americans have not read a book or piece of prose that contains capital letters distinguishing a perturbed tone. Pardon my diatribe. I don't mean to be so caustic, but when I first became a denizen of the internet community, (“netizen” is another word that I hate with all my being) I was only fourteen and needed no special education to know that words in all caps meant that they were to be given special emphasis. IN fact, it was almost necessary because first generation electronic communication did not have the capability to embolden, italicize, or underline words. Maybe that's where the gap lies – by the time businesses joined the electronic world the software suites they used were capable of all these embellishments. They did not have to deal with the dilemma of emphasizing words; but I digress.

Nor am I speaking of the other business practice of educating these business men to be wary in their word-choice. After all, the reader of the message cannot tell with what emotion you intended to write the message. My friend Andrew Laine, who is also a writer, (who, I do admit has more talent than I do) would argue that the previous statement is pure bull. After all, a story which he wrote (and which I hope to produce) induced a friend of mine to tears. Also, as an editorial journalist it is his job to pull the emotional strings of his readers like a puppet master.

For the most part I agree with him. I myself have brought people to tears and stirred up anger. However, I am not a typical engineer. I listen to rap, rock, and pop music. I can dance, have fashion sense, and (when not in college) comb and otherwise maintain my hair. I have a steady girlfriend who is not an engineer and who is actually visually appealing. Most of the engineers I work with are Dilbert clones. It is a very eerie feeling. As such they are hardly capable of emotion, much less conveying it through writing. In fact, most engineers are only capable of the set of emotions containing cynicism, sarcasm, pessimism, and other cheerful adjectives. The only other emotion possible is worry; the worry that things are not being done efficiently and as quickly as possible.

My boss exceeds in the first set of emotions. If awards were given out in those categories he would win the Oscar. This is not to say that he is a bad guy. Actually, I think it is helpful that engineers only have one set of emotions. It spares them from having to decode other emotions when dealing with colleagues. However, continuing with the archetype, my boss cannot write to save his life. His entire e-mail which would be a paragraph in the normal world consists of one gigantic run-on sentence. It is devoid

of all periods, commas, colons, and semi-colons. Even question marks do not exist in the realm of his brain that processes written language. Why these symbols of Roman Language never took hold is beyond me. However, the fact remains that it is hard to convey emotion when there aren't even any punctuation marks. For example, consider the following fragment from an e-mail, "My computer is broken and I hate it Bob when you think about computer replacements think of me". Correct punctuation, according to the writer's intent, would go like this: "My computer is broken and I hate it. Bob, when you think of computer replacements think of me." However, an alternative way of punctuating this would be: "My computer is broken. I hate it, Bob, when you think of computer replacements. Think of me." This second version sounds like some kind of deranged engineer love-letter. However unlikely it sounds that someone would interpret it that way, engineers tend to be lonely so, who knows? Yes, I can see Andrew cringing. At any rate, engineers have their own hurdles to jump before worrying about emotion in electronic correspondence. For most people, however, emotion in writing is not a problem. Most work e-mails carry messages that don't need emotion anyway. Who needs to declare that "there is to be a meeting at five o' clock eastern standard time," with emotion?

No, I do not consider either of those two types of training necessary. Like I said, most normal human beings outside of engineers already have those abilities innately. So what should the business men of this brave new world be educated in regarding interactions mediated by computers? He should learn about four powerful concepts that can make or break him in this new business world. They are the CC¹, BCC, return receipt, and saving e-mails in a borderline obsessive-compulsive manner. The strategies

¹ CC is carbon copy. It is a field in e-mail programs...if you don't know that much...stop reading now...

involve two important business concepts: blasting those in your way in a US vs. Nagasaki sort of way and the “cover your own ass” concept. The former is offensive and the latter is defensive, but employing at least one of them is important if one wishes to remain in the civil section known as the employed.

Most of these concepts can be used both offensively and defensively, so instead of discussing it in terms of dichotomy between offensive and defensive, I'd like to mention each concept and how it can be used for one purpose and then the other. Personally I prefer to work on the defensive. Interestingly enough, this is what I do when I play computer war simulations. I tend to focus more on building an impenetrable fortress than attacking. I think that it's easier to attack later when they can't destroy your method of producing tanks or Storm Troopers. It turns out that this personality tends to work well in the business world as well. Since the latest move in business is to view and organize everyone into teams. Thus people on the offensive are seen as Benedict Arnolds. However, if you master a blitzkrieg-type offensive where you move up so fast that no one realizes what's going on, it may succeed. You may also simply be an overly aggressive person like Andrew who is incapable of being on the defensive and considers anyone on the defensive as pusillanimous.

The first two concepts, CC and BCC, can be utilized in a ways that will give you powers that were never available to you in the telephone age. Previously, only one person would be communicated with at a time. If you wanted another person to be involved you had to first find them and then get them on the phone either by speaker phone or conference call. However, CC and BCC, give you very powerful tools. The first major benefit is the ability to have a witness. IF you want to be sure to get credit for

an idea or are making some sort of deniable statement you can include as many people as you want in the CC list from the lowest janitor to the president of the company. On the offensive you can CC the boss of the person you are replying to. Let us say, for example, that a coworker has been complaining to those Higher Up that you are not sending them what they need. Indeed you **have** been sending Bob all the widgets² you can, but his is just trying to keep the blame off himself for not being on time. By emailing him every time you send him a widget and CCing his boss you can go on the offensive. It's like damaging the trigger finger of someone shooting at you. It disables them. Also, it gives you a defensive edge; you can't be shot at anymore. To use CC defensively you can copy your boss on all e-mails you sent out. This keeps him informed of what you're doing so that he can protect you. Additionally it conveys to him that you are actually doing something outside of using up office supplies. The BCC is the Holy Grail of these concepts. In fact, it is so powerful that some software suites like Microsoft Outlook have removed the ability to use it. BCC stands for blind carbon copy. The blind aspect of it comes out of the fact that the receiver has no idea who else is receiving the e-mail. Yes, I can see Anton Ochoa (of the same breed as Mr. Laine) rubbing his hands with delight. By using BCC you can get bosses all the way up the chain alerted to what is going on without the receiver having the slightest clue. He won't know to censor his response or that he should listen to what you're saying because upper-management certainly is listening in. Of course, I should offer a word of extreme caution, being discovered as the user of BCC is equal in magnitude to the shooting down of U2, capture of Mike Meyers,

² Widget – the standard terminology referring to a manufactured piece. No one has ever seen the legendary widget and no one knows what one looks like or does. I suspect that it may be related to Cosmo's Cogs.

and the admitting that the US was involved in espionage. It is the greatest violation of trust out there. Use it only in emergency situations.

The next tactic, suing return-receipts, is also both an offensive and defensive technique. Return-receipts are a nifty feature that sends you an email when the recipient has opened your message. On the offensive, I offer an example that occurred with a colleague of mine. My colleague, Mr. B, was being bombarded by criticisms of a document that he has sent to the Antagonist. The Antagonist had been claiming that he had studied it for a week and found tons of flaws. Also on the phone was the Antagonist's boss. When he finished his tirade, Mr. B retaliated by stating that he had gotten a return-receipt that the document had just been opened before the meeting. There was no possible way that the Antagonist could have analyzed it. Thus, in front of the boss, the Antagonist's bluff was called. No doubt he was later rebuffed, not to mention the fact that his integrity was now damaged. Get enough blows to your integrity at work and you became as trustworthy to your bosses and peers as a child molester living near a preschool. To use it defensively, if your boss asks why you haven't emailed so and so, you can point out that so and so did receive it and even opened it. This takes the blame off of you.

Finally, my favorite approach is to save every last e-mail that I send and receive. This is a mostly defensive ploy. In the old days of phone conversation it was impossible to keep someone accountable to what they told you on the phone. If they decided to deny it, it was your word against theirs. You **could** record your phone conversations, but, unfortunately, this is illegal. Partaking in illegal activities at work is not condoned by this author. Of course, it would be legal if you let the other person know that you were

recording the conversation. This usually defeats the purpose because the person will speak in a guarded manner. There is also the troublesome task of having a medium to record to. Buying all those tapes could get expensive. These days if someone promises to do something you have proof that they made such a promise. This is useful because people tend to have a problem saying “no” to your proposition but do not expect to actually perform the promised task. With the proof of sent and received messages you cover your own ass quite well. Not doing it or doing it half-way has the ass-covering equivalent of daisy dukes. Doing it compulsively is like wearing a long, flowing Victorian dress. It will be hard to mess with you and be obvious if they try.

Those four techniques will allow you the best protection possible in the electronic age. Of course, they should augment other skills you are using to protect yourself. At any rate, one should be privy to the fact that the techniques are out there, even if you choose not to utilize these special skills you should know that others out there will use it against you. If you are unprepared you will be as vulnerable as the unfinished Death Star. Rest assured that someone will blow you to bits.