

THE HUMAN SIDE OF



Kumi Ishii

ELECTRONIC MAIL, OR E-MAIL, HAS BECOME A PROMINENT COMMUNICATION CHANNEL TODAY, ESPECIALLY AT WORK. BUT HAS THE USE OF E-MAIL CREATED

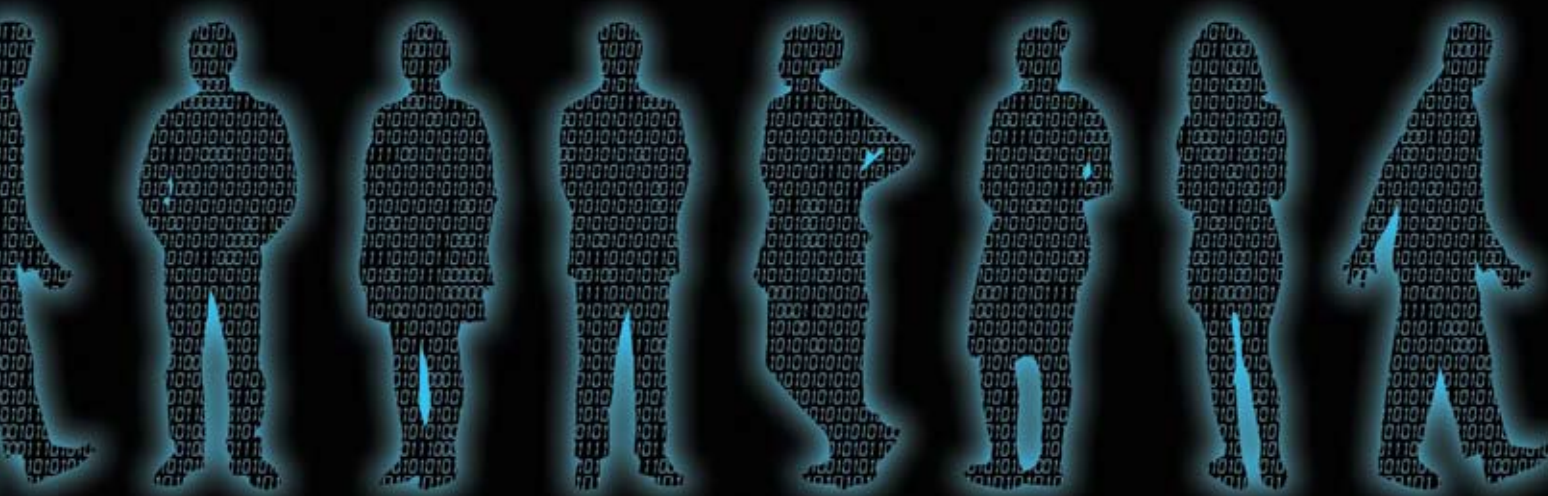
A DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG USERS? HOW DOES EXPERIENCE WITH E-MAIL CONTRIBUTE TO SATISFACTION WITH IT AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL? KUMI ISHII, AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATION AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, SURVEYED UNIVERSITY EMPLOYEES TO SEE THE EFFECT OF E-MAIL ON THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE.

“People use e-mail as a quick tool to communicate with others and it takes less effort than face-to-face (FtF) communication,” Dr. Ishii said. “So what happens is that we are increasing the amount of communication by e-mail, but at the same time we need to process a huge amount of messages, and some people are just overwhelmed. Nowadays we are receiving so many junk mails.”

Dr. Ishii said her interest goes back to her experience in Japan while she was working for a global company. “I was in business before coming back to academia, and my boss, who was sitting next to me, just e-mailed me

for anything,” she said. “She seldom talked to me face-to-face although we were sitting next to each other. I wondered why she would not talk to me and why she kept sending e-mails. Sometimes I was not comfortable with the situation.”

She said she also noticed that some people want to use e-mail to avoid face-to-face contact. “Use of technology never replaces face-to-face communication,” she added. “Sometimes e-mail is quick and people feel like they don’t want to disturb busy people by visiting their office, but FtF is still important and the best way to communicate with others in many circumstances.”



THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

BY BOB SKIPPER

Illustrations by Caitlin Elliott

Dr. Ishii wanted to see what factors affected communication satisfaction with e-mail in an organizational setting, so she sent questionnaires to 468 university employees. She received 303 responses that were used for data analysis. In the survey, she measured e-mail experience by asking how long the respondent had used e-mail overall and how long the respondent had used the current e-mail system. She also measured the amount of e-mail communication by the number of messages sent, number of messages received, frequency of access to the e-mail account, and time spent for e-mail communication. She

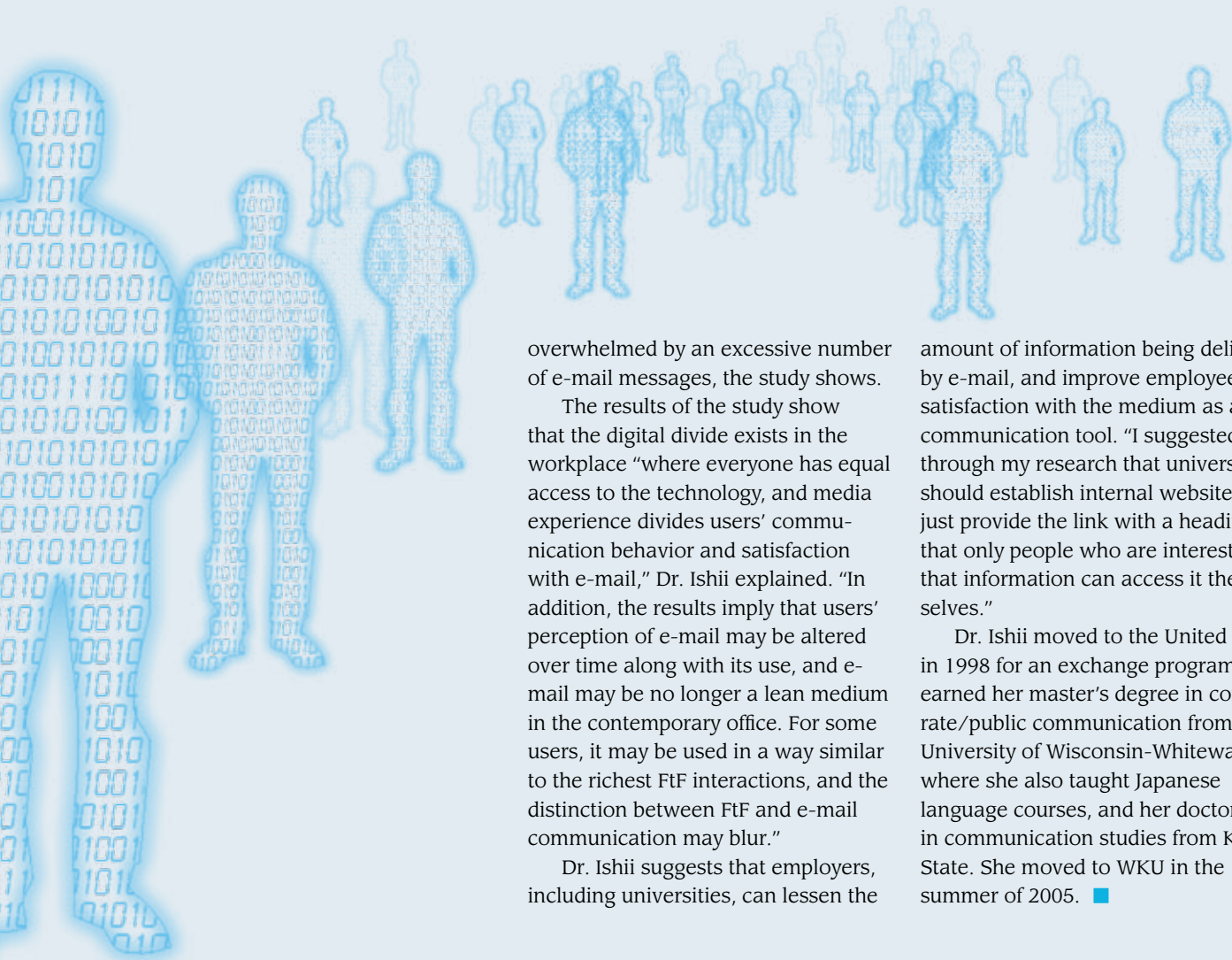
also looked at the purpose of e-mail use and measured communication satisfaction.

The results of her work were published in the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* (Vol. 35, Number 4, 2005) in the article "The Human Side of the Digital Divide: Media Experience as the Border of Communication Satisfaction with E-mail."

The digital divide often refers to the knowledge gap created by digital media, but "This study considers the human side of the digital divide in an organizational setting and investigates if the digital divide exists in

the workplace by examining multiple dimensions of communication satisfaction," Dr. Ishii wrote in the article. She adds that her data "indicate that e-mail experience differentiates communication satisfaction with amount of e-mail and e-mail use for equivocal tasks (e.g. conflict solution, negotiating, decision making)."

Dr. Ishii said organizational communication scholars value communication satisfaction in the workplace because of its strong relationship with job satisfaction and job productivity. Individual differences affect the amount of e-mail usage as well as the satisfaction with



overwhelmed by an excessive number of e-mail messages, the study shows.

The results of the study show that the digital divide exists in the workplace “where everyone has equal access to the technology, and media experience divides users’ communication behavior and satisfaction with e-mail,” Dr. Ishii explained. “In addition, the results imply that users’ perception of e-mail may be altered over time along with its use, and e-mail may be no longer a lean medium in the contemporary office. For some users, it may be used in a way similar to the richest FtF interactions, and the distinction between FtF and e-mail communication may blur.”

Dr. Ishii suggests that employers, including universities, can lessen the

amount of information being delivered by e-mail, and improve employee satisfaction with the medium as a communication tool. “I suggested through my research that universities should establish internal websites and just provide the link with a heading so that only people who are interested in that information can access it themselves.”

Dr. Ishii moved to the United States in 1998 for an exchange program. She earned her master’s degree in corporate/public communication from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where she also taught Japanese language courses, and her doctorate in communication studies from Kent State. She moved to WKU in the summer of 2005. ■

e-mail as a communication tool, she said. For example, younger or newer employees and women are more likely to use e-mail to socialize in the work setting, and effective managers are less likely to use e-mail for equivocal tasks. “Yet, those who are more experienced with e-mail perceive the medium as richer than do those who are less experienced, and thus, those who perceive e-mail to be rich are more likely to use it for any purposes,” Dr. Ishii wrote.

Less experienced users, while they may be comfortable using e-mail to communicate with co-workers whom they know well, may be easily

