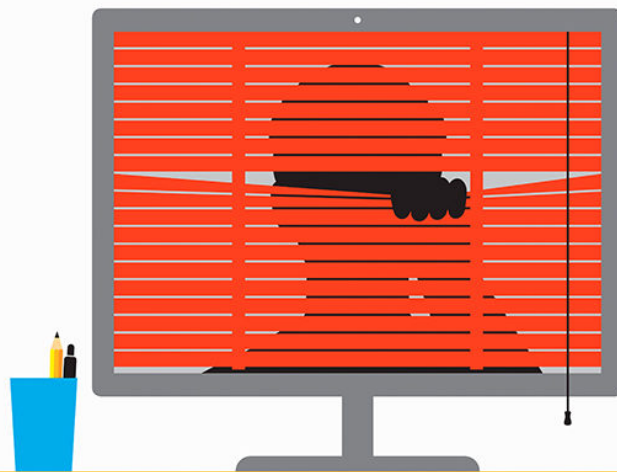


COLLABORATION

Why Bcc-ing the Boss Is a Bad Practice

by David De Cremer, Jack McGuire, and Tessa Haesevoets

SEPTEMBER 07, 2018



PATRICK GEORGE/GETTY IMAGES

Imagine you're drafting an email about a sensitive project when you realize you need to keep your supervisor in the loop. You decide to Bcc her on the email. Later, the rest of the team finds out. How does this make them feel?

Email continues to be one of the most common ways people communicate at work – and one of the most common ways people miscommunicate at work. The Cc and Bcc functions can corrode trust and cloud intentions. To explore how senders and recipients interpret the use of these tools, we conducted a series of five experimental studies in which a total of 694 working adults participated.

In our first study, we wanted to explore how people perceive the use of Bcc relative to the use of Cc. We invited working adults (75 females and 41 males; average work experience of 10.75 years) via the online system Prolific Academic (ProA), which has earned a reputation of providing a high level of data quality. Participants were presented with either one of two work-related situations that described a situation in which their coworker sent the participant an email including their supervisor in either Bcc or Cc. Participants then had to evaluate the work situation presented on a number of measures. This study revealed that people consider Bcc-ing a supervisor as less moral, more secretive, and more intimidating than Cc-ing a supervisor.

In a second study, we set out to uncover the reasons people choose to use Bcc in the first place. With this study, we hoped to understand when people *do not* view the use of Bcc as immoral or deceptive – when they're more likely to use it. In this survey, we mentioned to our participants (recruited via ProA; 34 females and 24 males; average work experience of 17.38 years) that much communication in organizations takes place via email. In these email exchanges people sometimes use the Bcc option. We then asked participants to share what they thought were valid reasons for people using Bcc. The reason they most frequently cited was “administrative reasons” (for example, to “update the supervisor in such a way that they know their reply to the email is not required” or not wanting to “share the contact information of the supervisor and run the risk that the supervisor will be contacted directly”).

In two subsequent studies (participants were recruited again via ProA), we tested whether these two “administrative” explanations would soften recipients’ negative perceptions of the sender. Participants in these two experiments were connected in an online simulation. (Participants consisted of 91 females and 66 males with an average work experience of 10.94 years in Experiment 1, and 80 females and 73 males with an average work experience of 12.23 years in Experiment 2.) Specifically, they were made aware that they would be working in a company that had three hierarchical levels: employees, middle management, and top management. Participants were allocated to the employee position. They were informed that they would have to work on several tasks, which would be explained later by the middle manager. They would perform these tasks in a team context with two other employees. Before the tasks were explained, each participant received an email from their coworker (i.e. the sender), which included the team supervisor in either Bcc or Cc. The results of these two studies showed that the use of Bcc (compared to the use of the more-transparent Cc function) made recipients evaluate the sender as less moral – and less fit to be the team leader. Somewhat surprisingly, our results revealed that when the sender retroactively mentioned either of these two “administrative” reasons for using Bcc, recipients’ negative perceptions did *not* soften.

To be sure, situations do exist where, for the interest of the team or the organization, an email has to be shared with someone higher up without the other recipients knowing. We conducted a final study to address situations like these. In this experimental study (recruited via ProA; 90 females and 62 males; average work experience of 10.46 years), we used the same method as in the other two experiments where we compared the use of Bcc and Cc, but this time we also added the option of forwarding the email after it has been sent off to other recipients. Our results found that people significantly prefer forwarding emails to Bcc-ing, and also perceive forwarding emails to be less harmful, even though recipients continue to perceive the sender as having immoral intentions.

What are the implications of these findings for organizations and supervisors?

First, these findings clearly underscore the idea that Bcc-ing the supervisor is best avoided. Our studies also convincingly demonstrate that attempting to justify the use of Bcc does not improve the negative impressions associated with it. Our findings indeed revealed that the primary reason why the Bcc-option is so looked down upon is the fact that recipients perceive the sender as having immoral intentions and being willing to harm their interests.

While Cc-ing the supervisor is a more acceptable communication strategy than the use of the Bcc-option, it can still elicit uncomfortable and negative feelings. Earlier research by one of us demonstrated that when employees work together on a common project, Cc-ing the supervisor sends a threatening signal to coworkers, undermining the trust within teams.

Forwarding emails is a common practice for many of us and may present a solution to the Bcc problem. We did find that forwarding an email to a supervisor is generally more acceptable than Bcc-ing the supervisor at the outset. But, as our results show, forwarding introduces its own set of issues and is not a flawless method.

An effective solution could be to rewrite an email to personally address a team supervisor. Such an email could be framed as an update and would achieve the administrative goals of Bcc-ing – to keep the supervisor up to date – without alienating the rest of the team.



David De Cremer is the KPMG professor of management studies at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, UK, a co-founder of the One Belt One Road research platform at Cambridge, and a visiting professor at Peking University HSBC Business School, China. Before moving to the UK he was a professor of management at China Europe International Business School in Shanghai. He is the author of the books *Pro-active Leadership* and *Huawei: Leadership, culture, and connectivity*.

Jack McGuire is the Experimental Lab Manager of the Cambridge Experimental and Behavioural Economics Group (CEBEG) and Research Assistant in the Department of Organisational Leadership and Decision-Making at Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. He has obtained an MA (SocSci) from the University of Glasgow, an MSc from University College London, and has also held research positions in the University of Tübingen and the University of Hong Kong. His research interests are primarily in behavioural ethics, decision making, and organizational behaviour.

Tessa Haesevoets is a Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University, Belgium. She obtained an MSc from the Open University (the Netherlands) and holds a PhD from Ghent University (Belgium). Her primary research interests include organizational behaviour, trust repair, financial compensation, and apologies.

This article is about **COLLABORATION**

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: [MANAGING PEOPLE](#) | [ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE](#) | [COMMUNICATION](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

0 COMMENTS

 [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.