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The electronic mail as a means of communication at the educational institutions : based on the example of Bielsko-Biała branch of the board of education area

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THE ELECTRONIC MAIL AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AT THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF BIELSKO-BIAŁA BRANCH OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION AREA¹

1. Introductory notes

In today's world sudden transformations take place practically in every field of life. They concern also the education, which in recent years is subject to the dynamic changes. These changes widely impact the areas associated with ICT (Information and communications technology). In such organizations like schools, the technological revolution is taking place in both educational, as well as organizational areas. It is commonly believed that we live in such a dynamic environment that its instability impacts all dimensions of the social-cultural order. Education is a part of this order, is contributing to it, is influenced by it, and together they are subject to the process of forming new rationality – postmodernist breakthrough². The nature of teachers work requires permanent development of professional skills and continuous extension of not only the subject matter expertise and teaching competences, but also skills essential to deliver on widely understood social function of the school, which is driven by the changes in the today's world and the dynamic technological progress³.

The purpose of this article is the analysis of the communication processes⁴ using electronic mail, at the educational institutions of Bielsko-Biała Branch of the Board of Education area. This subject stems from author's conviction that electronic mail is at present the most common tool used for information exchange in education. Author's intention is

¹ The PhD dissertation conducting by supervisor dr hab. Eugenia Smyrnova-Trybulska, University of Silsia.

² H. Rusek, A. Górniok-Naglik, J. Oleksy (red.), *Oświata w otoczeniu burzliwym. Migotliwe konteksty i perspektywy rozwoju współczesnej edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2008, s. 9.

³ K. Przyszczypkowski, *Oświata samorządowa w perspektywie raportów – stan i perspektywy zmian*, <http://www.modn.opole.pl> [12.12.2014].

⁴ L. Haber, *Komunikowanie i zarządzanie w społeczeństwie informacyjnym*, Kraków, 2011, s. 66.

to evaluate the effectiveness and the professionalism of using this tool⁵⁶. For the purpose of this article, all e-mail addresses from the education office official mailing list have been analyzed. The analyzed area comprises of the following districts: Bielsko-Biała, Cieszyn, Pszczyna and Żywiec. Data was obtained from the emails regularly sent to schools (email addresses aren't hidden). All institutions included in the educational system⁷ have been included in this analysis, i.e. kindergartens, schools and counseling centers. At the end of this article, the conclusions and proposed solutions for educational organizations have been presented. For the purposes of this article a terminology interchangeably describing the entities in focus as schools, the educational institutions or the educational units has been used.

2. Analysis of the e-mail accounts in educational institutions (status as of 2013).

a) E-mail domains used by the schools

In the area of the Bielsko-Biała branch office, 466 institutions use free of charge email accounts (i.e. 71%) out of the total of 657 analyzed.

Table 1. Free of charge domains used by the educational institutions in the area of Bielsko-Biała Branch of the Board of Education

Domain name	Number of institutions	%
wp.pl	106	22,7%
poczta.onet.pl	87	18,7%
op.pl	61	13,1%
o2.pl	42	9%
gmail.com	41	8,8%
interia.pl	34	7,3%
neostrada.pl	24	5,2%

⁵ P. Wróbel, *Konsekwencje stosowania poczty elektronicznej z perspektywy organizacji i pracowników*, E-mentor nr 2 (44) / 2012 [03.05.2014].

⁶ P. Wróbel, *Skala i sposób wykorzystania poczty elektronicznej w organizacjach*, Współczesne zarządzanie, 2010, nr 4.

⁷ Rozdział 1 Art. 2 Ustawy z dnia 7 września 1991 r. o systemie oświaty.

Domain name	Number of institutions	%
onet.eu	13	2,8%
vp.pl	12	2,6%
poczta.fm	11	2,4%
netsfera.pl	7	1,5%
interia.eu	7	1,5%
tlen.pl	5	1,1%
gazeta.pl	4	0,9%
oswiata.org.pl	3	0,6%
poczta.onet.eu	2	0,4%
toras.pl	2	0,4%
amorki.pl	2	0,4%
pkom.pl	2	0,4%
onet.pl	1	0,2%

Source: own study

In the analyzed data, most addresses belongs to the Onet group - 178. Amongst free of charge accounts the most popular is wp.pl (Wirtualna Polska) - 106 mail accounts. Out of this number 8 accounts belong to private persons (most often to director).

The other email domains used by the educational institutions are: mzo.bielsko.pl - 48, accounts attached to local commune offices - 37, subdomains - 23, other - 23, own domains - 60.

The mzo.bielsko.pl domain is used by 48 institutions. The prefix is an abbreviation for the Miejski Zarząd Oświaty in Bielsko-Biała. The majority of institutions using this domain have a cohesive, uniform naming system. The name consists of the abbreviation for the kindergarten and its number (pm11@mzo.bielsko.pl), or the primary school and its number (sp35@mzo.bielsko.pl), or junior high school (gm13@mzo.bielsko.pl).

Some institutions have acquired their own subdomains, which are associated with the name of their town. The mostly used domains are: cieszyn.pl, bielsko.pl, katowice.pl.

37 schools and kindergartens decided to use email domain of their commune offices. Most of them in the commune Hażlach - 8 (all institutions), making the consistent and transparent naming scheme. For example the primary school in Zamarski uses the email address spz@hazlach.pl.

The number of institutions using e-mail domains of their local commune offices: hazlach.pl - 8, swinna.pl - 6, chybie.pl - 5.

Number of institutions which used e-mail domains of their local commune offices - 18.

Only 60 schools, i.e. 9% manage their email using their own domain (the *name.pl* or *name.edu.pl* are most common).

23 other accounts are difficult to classify. They happen to be three or even four-part names (all free of charge).

b) analysis of the names used in e-mail addresses

All names of email accounts from the official distribution list of the Bielsko-Biała branch of educational office have been analyzed (prefix of the e-mail). As a result of this analysis certain observations and generalizations can be drawn.

Most often only one general email address is used, e.g. sp13@wp.pl, through which the school can be contacted. The addresses assigned to individual departments of the school, e.g. director, secretary's office, administration, etc. are used occasionally. Besides the private email addresses used for working purposes, generally speaking the individual addresses, assigned to school employees, which would allow for direct contact with them, are not used.

Only some special characters can be used in the e-mail names, i.e.: dot, dash, underscore. However, in the analyzed data sample, such characters were used quite often, actually even overused. Underscore “_” have been used 56 times, with one extreme case having it 4 times in one name. The other special sign, hyphen, has been used 26 times and dots are used also pretty generously.

The primary schools most often use the “sp” abbreviation. Quite often the name of the town or a school number is being used in addition. Only 4 email addresses belong to school director (have the word “director” or a part of it in the name, suggesting that the mail should go to this person). The shortened name of director (dyr) has been applied 3 times in the surveyed data sample.

Out of home addresses which are being used for the professional communication at school, many have the full name and surname, others only the name and a number or a nickname. Quite a few names don't meet the formal communication standards, holding names like ‘terenia’ (little Teresa) or ‘kaczka’ (duck) etc. Other observed constructions can be represented by example “przedszkole-nr-2”. Others are usually the abbreviations of different names, e.g. gim, sp, zsp, or the names of the town, or connecting the name of the town with the number of the school and the abbreviation of the name of the school. The word “szkoła” (school) appears in 41 cases. Another, interesting group of names come from combining various words, forming neologisms. They are relatively simple to remember. One example could be “gimgol”, which was made of the abbreviation for the junior high school (“gim” for gimnazjum) and Golezów – name of the town.

As for the names suggesting a direct recipient: the secretary's office was used 34 times, dyr - 3 times, director - 1 time, management - 1 time, office - 8 times, mail - 3 times.

In several cases the very long names have been used (the longest is 29 characters) or quite reckless, for example:

- *urzd.miasta.przedszkole.nr51@neostrada.pl*
- *szkola_w_mow_w_jaworzu@interklasa.pl*
- *prz1ottonklobus@op.pl*
- *przedszkole-nr-2@wp.pl*
- *przedszkole_w_suszczu@poczta.onet.pl*
- *szkola_podstawowa_7@wp.pl*
- *przedszkole.twardorzeczka@onet.eu*
- They are also some names with difficult to decipher domain name, e.g.:
- *sekretariat@zl-czdz.internetdsl.pl*

The majority of applications enable use of hyperlinks, however problems may appear when such email addresses are spelled over the phone.

Another issue which may cause some problems is connected with Polish diacritics used in the town names. The examples could be such towns as Dziegiełów or Hażlach.

3. Findings related to use of the electronic mail at the educational institutions

The research was conducted through the web portal www.ebadania.pl⁸. The message with the request to fill out the questionnaire form was sent to 657 boxes, with "badania" word put in the subject line.

The pilot survey was performed between 1st and 8th February 2013 on 20 randomly selected institutions. The main survey was conducted from 8th of February to 8th of March 2013. The message was sent to all educational institutions from the Bielsko-Biała branch of education office, out of which 130 schools responded with the filled questionnaire (19.75%). Right after the message was sent out, 25 replies came back with information about the non-delivery of the mail (addresses out of date).

The request for the filling of the questionnaire was sent during the winter holidays. This way the delays or breaks in checking the incoming email could be examined. Moreover the message was sent after 5 p.m. in order to verify if the inboxes are being checked after work hours. The Delivery Receipt and Read Receipt options have been used. On the same day two recipients confirmed the receipt of the message, however only 1 questionnaire returned. On the first day 20 receipt notes were received until 10 a.m. The following days showed the following pattern:

⁸ M. Szpunar, *Internet w procesie realizacji badań*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2010.

Table 2. Number of returned questionnaires and number of receipt confirmations in consecutive days

Day	Receipt confirmation	Number of returned questionnaires
1 day	2	1
2 day	20	6
3 day	1	2
4 day	1	0
5 day	4	0

Source: own study

Essentially within two weeks of holidays 15 questionnaire forms were filled in.

The request was repeated right after holidays, showing much better response rate. Within three days 90 institutions returned a questionnaire, whereas after one week this number rose to 130. However, confirmations of receiving a message came even after a few months.

Below tables present the results of the questionnaire survey.

Table 3.

Question 1. Is the address, to which you received this message, a formal e-mail of the institution?		
replies	number	%
yes	125	96%
no	3	2%
absence of an answer	2	2%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

The vast majority of respondents confirmed that the address, to which the mail was sent was a formal e-mail of the institution. 3 schools indicated that it wasn't a formal address, and two didn't answer. From it is possible to conclude that analysis of addresses is representative.

Table 4.

Question 2. Do you have more official accounts of the electronic mail at your institution?		
replies	number	%
yes	33	25%
no	93	72%
absence of an answer	4	3%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

The question was aimed at verifying the number of mail accounts. 33 schools declared having more e-mail addresses. The majority of institutions have only one mailing address. In these cases sorting of the incoming email to management, the secretary's office, or individual teachers is not possible, which would be case, should they had bought their own email domain.

Table 5.

Question 3. If your facility uses several e-mails, please indicate who owns (multiple choice question)		
replies	number	%
headmaster	28	30%
secretary's office	30	33%
teachers	9	10%
bookkeeping	11	12%
attendants	5	5%
other persons	9	10%
together	92	100%

Source: own study

In 91cases “zero” response was received, which confirms that schools don’t use multiple email accounts (which is in line with the question No. 2). Respondents declared that 28 email addresses belonged to the director, but after analysis of the addresses it appears that only 1 address is referring to the director. It is possible that the home addresses of directors have been included. 30 respondents pointed the secretary's office and 34 school email accounts have a “secretary's office” in their name.

Table 6.

Question 4. Does your institution have own domain?		
replies	number	%
yes	68	52%
no	58	45%
absence of an answer	4	3%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

Over 50% of respondents claim that they have a unique name for their institution, which doesn't reflect the analysis of the mail accounts run by author. That fact may indicate the lack of comprehension of such terms as domain, free of charge domain.

Table 7.

Question 5. Does your institution have a official website?		
replies	number	%
yes	113	87%
no	12	9%
absence of an answer	5	4%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

Vast majority of institutions (87%) understands the need of the communication through the websites and practices it.

Table 8.

Question 6. Do e-mail addresses have the same domain as your website?		
replies	number	%
yes	40	31%
no	72	55%
absence of an answer	18	14%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

The question of No. 6 was aimed at checking, whether websites have the same name (domain) as e-mail address. Considerable part of respondents (18) left this question unanswered, which again leads to conclusion that they may be lacking understanding of the term “domain”.

Table 9.

Question 7. How often do you check a mailbox at your institution? (single choice question)		
replies	number	%
several times a day	103	79%
daily	23	18%
every day	1	1%
once a week	0	0%
occasionally	0	0%
absence of an answer	3	2%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

The majority of respondents understands the need of regular and frequent checking of the mailbox, declaring looking into it several times per day. However, it doesn't correspond with the Read Receipt statistics performed by author.

Table 10.

Question 8. Who is responsible for dealing with email at your school? (multiple choice question)		
replies	number	%
headmaster	100	45%
secretary	88	39%
computer specialist	14	6%
teacher	11	5%
other persons	12	5%
absence of an answer	0	0%
together	225	100%

Source: own study

According to the respondents, in most of the cases it's a school director and the secretary, who deal with school's electronic mail.

Table 11.

Question 9. Do you work on your professional/school email outside of school?		
replies	number	%
never	22	17%
occasionally	60	46%
often	44	34%
absence of an answer	4	3%
together	130	100%

Source: own study

The question No. 9 tested the frequency of using mail outside of workplace. Such behaviors impact the work-life balance, increasing the number of working hours, as well as causing difficulties to separate the private life from the professional one. Over 80% of respondents confirmed that they were checking their mailbox outside of workplace. However, the analysis of the time of receipt of the message shows the hours between 8 a.m. and noon.

Table 12.

Question 10. Please indicate the person who has filled this questionnaire (question of single choice).		
replies	number	%
headmaster	88	68%
secretary	32	25%
computer specialist	3	2%
teacher	0	0%
another person	5	4%
absence of an answer	2	1%
together	225	100%

Source: own study

From the received answers looks like it is mostly the directors (68%) and the secretaries (25%), who read the email coming to school.

The summary and conclusions

The electronic mail has become the most often used communication tool at the educational institutions. The use of electronic mail is very common; however the quality of this communication is unsatisfactory. Very little attention is paid to the professionalism of use. The most apparent synopsis of it is lack of the standardized naming convention of the email addresses, connected with selection of hosting services. It's difficult to accept use of private email addresses as the official school addresses. That may have significant consequences in case of changes, e.g. on the position of school director. Also lack of response during school breaks is worrying, as the school has certain organizational duties also during those breaks.

The survey shows that most of the educational institutions don't have individual email addresses assigned to particular departments or people. Usually they have just one email address, which means that all information is delivered to, filtered and distributed through the secretary. In most of the schools all messages are stored in just one folder, despite the fact that particular messages are directed to multiple people (management, teachers, service, steward, counsel, speech therapist etc.) That makes looking for given information extremely difficult.

The survey also indicated that school directors often delegate email management to others, for example secretary, deputy or less frequently to the IT specialists (table 10, 12). Access to one mailbox is granted to several people, which leads to potential data confidentiality issues, including personal data protection.

In order to improve the situation with email management author recommends:

- to acquire the unique email domain and hosting services, either by school or by the local commune;
- to standardize the naming convention of email accounts and the websites;
- to standardize domain naming convention on given area or within the organizational units;
- to use professional hosting services, offering additional tools and functions, among others limiting undesirable messages (spam),
- to establish email accounts assigned to individual departments and functions (secretary's office, bookkeeping, management); to create the formal mailing address of the type `secretary@nameoftheschool.pl`
- to establish email accounts for individual teachers in school domain and to standardize naming according to the `name@nameoftheschool.pl` scheme;
- to use adequate tools for efficient management of messages, to create folders, catalogues, to put labels in order to catalogue and to organize;
- to raise the awareness of school directors in terms of the professionalization of communication processes at school, to conduct training for all school staff in ICT;
- on websites present the email addresses of individual departments, or employees;
- to optimize use of email (templates, redirections).

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The electronic mail as a means of communication at the educational institutions. Based on the example of Bielsko-Biała Branch of the Board of Education area.

The electronic mail became one of main tools of the transmission of information at an educational institutions, not always however is used into the appropriate manner. In the article they made analysis of mailing addresses as well as they presented research results concerning using the electronic mail at schools. On this base the author is suggesting solutions which can contribute to the improvement in processes of the communication in the education.

Keywords: **education, communication, education management, ICT, e-mail**

Poczta elektroniczna jako narzędzie komunikacji w placówkach oświatowych. Na przykładzie obszaru Delegatury Kuratorium Oświaty w Bielsku-Białej

Poczta elektroniczna stała się jednym z głównych narzędzi przekazywania informacji w placówkach oświatowych, nie zawsze jednak jest wykorzystywana w odpowiedni sposób. W artykule dokonano analizy adresów pocztowych oraz zaprezentowano wyniki badań dotyczących wykorzystania poczty elektronicznej w szkołach. Na tej podstawie autor proponuje rozwiązania, które mogą przyczynić się do poprawy procesów komunikacji w oświacie.

Słowa kluczowe: oświata, komunikacja, zarządzanie oświatą, ICT, poczta elektroniczna

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