Delivery Not Guaranteed

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A little while ago a colleague wrote on her Facebook page,

> "Just found out that the University is expecting me to teach this semester. Last evening was the first I officially hear of this. I got a strange email from a student in the morning asking about the class, so I contacted the school to find out why a student was asking me. The response was, "Didn't you get the contract back in December?" No, I didn't. Then the comment, "See you on Wednesday for class!" Like in TOMORROW??? OMG! That is why I couldn't sleep."

I added to the thread of shocked, sympathetic comments as follows:

> "People don't realize that the definitions of email from the Internet Engineering Task Force Requests for Comments (RFCs) do not include guaranteed delivery. Anyone using email to communicate operationally important information *must* use (a) read-receipts and (b) out-of-band confirmation (e.g., telephone calls) to confirm delivery – and agreement if there's a contract involved!"

The unfortunate incident got me thinking of the wider issue of confirming communications. Supplementary, optional information need not require confirmed delivery, but any operationally-significant information or instruction must have confirmed delivery. Medical offices routinely use an answering message that warns callers not to leave a message if they need emergency help. How would you feel if you had to leave a voice-mail message for an emergency-response team? When the emergency-response operator answers a 999 or 112 call in the United Kingdom or a 911 call in the USA and Canada, every transfer to the appropriate service (fire, ambulance, police) is done with the caller on the line. The caller is immediately transferred to another agent – not told to leave a message.

For technical support and computer-security emergency-response teams, it's essential that the problem-ticket system automatically sends a confirmation message to the client indicating the ticket number for every request for help – a particularly important function when the lines are busy and a client leaves a voice-mail message, or when a client sends a help request through email. With enough exposure to such a policy, clients quickly come to expect the confirmation; if their original request is lost, misdelivered, or ignored, the lack of prompt confirmation from the help desk alerts the client to the likelihood that their message never reached anyone in technical support so they can try again.

When transferring responsibility for a technical-support case from one agent to another, the transferring agent must make person-to-person contact with the agent who will pick up the case; leaving a voice-mail message or sending an email message is not good enough. An interrupted chain of communication will leave a client hanging without support for an indefinite period. An alternative to telephone or in-person contact is instant messaging (IM); an IM request can elicit an immediate response – and failure to respond can prompt further attempts to make contact or

perhaps a switch to a different resource person. In any case, the client will never be abandoned because of an interrupted communication attempt.

Since arriving at Norwich University in 2001, I have consistently refused to accept student essays or assignments on paper. For the first few years, I told students to submit term papers and exams using email; however, a few years ago, when our learning platform became available, I switched to using the intranet functions to upload the assignments to a repository for each assignment. It provides a detailed record of exactly when each student upload his or her file, so there's no ambiguity or uncertainty about whether the student submitted the work on time.

When planning for adjunct faculty staffing, every proposed contract should be confirmed before the contract is sent. My policy would be to make live contact by phone or voice-over IP (VoIP) to ensure that the instructor agrees to teach and accepts the terms of the contract. Then the director of the school or department should send instructions by email to the human resources (HR) group asking for a contract to be sent – and the standard procedure should be that the request is copied to the instructor. The HR group should always send an email confirmation to both the issuing department and to the instructor. If a paper contract is the only format permitted, an HR official should verify that it was received, signed and returned within a reasonable period (say, a week). Lack of response within the stated time would prompt a follow-up call. A checklist would make it easier to ensure that every step of this procedure is completed.

Don't count on luck when interacting on critical issues: verify delivery as a matter of course.

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