Many of us like to think that status isn’t as important as it was a generation or two ago. We can point to the hippie movement, equal rights legislation, and the recent rapid growth of small entrepreneurial firms as forces that have made organizations more egalitarian. The reality is that we continue to live in an essentially class-structured society. Despite all attempts to make it more egalitarian, we have made little progress toward a classless society. Even the smallest group will develop roles and rituals to differentiate its members. And we’re finding that even the New Economy organizations adapt mechanisms to create status differences. Take, for instance, e-mail. Here is a communication device that was touted as being able to democratize organizations. It allows people to communicate up and down hierarchical lines, unimpeded by gatekeepers and protocols. But you know what? Status differences have crept into the e-mail process. A recent study of some 30,000 e-mail messages at a New Economy firm that didn’t use job titles, was organized around teams, and prided itself on democratic decision making provides interesting insights. People had found ways to create social
distinctions. High-status employees tended to send short, curt messages, in part to minimize contact with lower-status workers but also to convey comfort with their own authority. In contrast, mid-status employees tended to produce long, argumentative messages loaded with jargon or overexplained answers to simple questions. And low-status employees’ e-mails would contain non-work-related elements like forwarded jokes or happy-face “emoticons.” In addition, the study found that senior managers would take the longest to reply, had the poorest spelling, and the worst grammar—which all conveyed that they have better things to do with their time.

Status is an important factor in understanding human behavior because it is a significant motivator and can create major problems when people perceive status inequities. A fancy title, a large office, or even an impressive business card can carry a lot of weight in motivating employees. Conversely, a lack of status accoutrements can make people feel less important. Status inequities create frustration and can adversely influence employee performance and even lead to an unwanted resignation.

Keep in mind that the criteria that create status differ widely between cultures. For instance, status for Latin Americans and Asians tends to be derived from family position.
and formal roles held in organizations. In contrast, status in countries like the United States and Australia tends to be bestowed more on accomplishments than titles and family positions. The message here is to make sure you understand who and what holds status when interacting with people from a different culture than your own. An American manager who doesn't understand that office size is no measure of a Japanese executive's position or who fails to grasp the importance that the British place on family genealogy and social class is likely to unintentionally offend his Japanese or British counterpart and, in so doing, lessen his interpersonal effectiveness.