Harnessing Electronics for Effective Communications

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Podcast Transcript

Hello, my name is Irma Alvarez with UF Training and Organizational Development. Today I will talk to you about harnessing electronics for effective communication.

As technology becomes more commonplace, so do expectations that we'll incorporate it in our workplace activities and use it to our advantage. When time and distance separate us, using electronic methods of communication can often save us time and other resources. Communicating, however, is not just about exchanging words but also their meaning within an overall context. Body language and other nuances of human understanding are easily conveyed when we share the same physical space. However, virtual communication may hinder their expression and, thereby, trigger misunderstandings.

This podcast aims to highlight some of the difficulties in communication that you might encounter when using some of the most common technologies available in the workplace. I'll also share with you some ways to prevent those from interfering with your ultimate goal: to communicate successfully.

Let's begin by talking about Email

Email has a lot of benefits. You write it at your convenience, and the recipients read and provide a response when they can focus on it. You can efficiently transmit information to a wide distribution, and you can also track the history of exchanges. However, in the interest of speed and convenience, sometimes we forget that using

email properly still requires thought, polish and restraint. Let's review some email dos and don'ts:

Do
- Write a concise, informative and engaging subject line; it will help the recipient prioritize it as it sets the initial context and the importance of the content.
- Be brief and keep the body of the email to the point. Short paragraphs, lists, and bullet points will help your reader skim through to the end of your message. If you need to, attach documents with additional relevant supporting information.
- However, remember that emailing is not texting–watch your use of acronyms or shortcuts.
- Include a next step as well as the date by which you expect a reply.
- Proofread, check for topic and tone and wait a few seconds before hitting "send." An email can easily be forwarded to anyone. Would you regret others reading what you wrote?
- Likewise, allow yourself time to consider how you want to react to an email that triggers an emotional response in you, and be especially mindful of whether you want to include others in your response. "Once you hit the Send button, you're committed," warns communication expert Diana Booher.
- Finally, reply to an email within 48 hours or set up an automatic reply if you plan to be offline for extended periods.

Let's now consider some email don'ts.
- Don't hide behind the screen or use email to communicate messages that need to be shared face-to-face. Do not use email to share private or secure information, or to convey unpleasant news—including performance deficiencies--or for anything that is at risk of being misunderstood such as sarcasm or humor that could be misinterpreted.
- Don't use email for urgent matters requiring an immediate response. You never know when someone will be able to read your message.
- Don't overdo emoticons, bolding, underlining or capital letters, which make the readers feel like you are screaming at them.
- Don't think you need to respond to every email and be mindful of choosing "reply all" when a group of recipients will not benefit from your answer.

One final comment: While emails are great for informal communications, they do not excuse poor writing. The accuracy and quality of your writing is not only a projection of your image, but it's crucial to whether your message is even heard– or understood. An email that contains grammar mistakes, disorganized ideas, tangled wording, or a confusing layout reflects poorly on you and disorients, or altogether disengages, the reader. If you think your writing skills could be improved, work on them and remember that UF Training & Organizational Development offers free courses that can help you.

<u>Let's now look at remote meetings.</u>
Remote meetings require the same planning as face-to-face meetings, and then some.

- While developing a remote meeting agenda, keep in mind that as the number of participants and connections increases so can the difficulties. While the range will vary depending on the technology available, try to limit a remote meeting to no more than 7 participants.
- When you send out an agenda for a remote meeting, make sure to include any necessary dial-in or log-in process information.
- If you are setting up the call or videoconference but are not technically fluent, consider practicing the set-up ahead of time or enlisting the help of a telecommunications-savvy colleague who might remain "on call" during the meeting.
- Encourage your participants to test their connections and technology ahead of time, so they don't delay the start of the meeting. And establish a "plan b" in case you should get disconnected: Will the meeting recess until all are back on or will the meeting be postponed? Who will call whom back?
- Begin remote meeting set-up at least 10-15 minutes before the scheduled meeting is due to begin, but test the audio or video connection, Wi-Fi, and any apps well ahead of time. For a video conference, use this time to set up the camera angle, so it's at eye level. You want to make sure you look straight at the camera to establish eye contact with your viewers.

<u>Let's specifically talk about conference calls with voice exchange only.</u>
Before beginning the conversation, check for a good connection where all can hear each other. Be aware of sound travel delays and the importance of enunciating. You will likely introduce all participants at the beginning of the call, but another good practice is for each speaker to say his or her name before making a statement. As the meeting facilitator, you should clearly identify when

you are moving from one topic to the next and make a point of signaling the end of the conversation for all.

Finally, remember this observation and suggestion from Pete Johnson of InfoQ: "With a decreased chance of facing repercussions, people are more likely to concentrate on something else at remote meetings than they are during face-to-face ones. For that reason, you not only have to make it clear why you need them to be there with your published agenda, but walk them through the items in order and referring to them frequently."

Let's now consider videoconferencing which presents other opportunities and challenges. Videoconferencing allows us not only to hear but also see each other on the screen. Successful videoconferencing will require robust technology. Remember also that fast movements, bright or light clothing and shiny objects can distract and affect video quality.
Videoconferencing can add dimensions that can make participants feel almost as if they were sitting in the same room. Screensharing, for example, allows you to show documents or other software on your computer with connected users who see what's on your screen in real time and may also allow you to maintain live minutes and record important discussion points as they happen. Chat boxes or interactive writing or drawing tools could also be useful. Consider if your agenda objectives may benefit from any of these and search for good options accordingly.

As we talk about all these technologies that can be used in today's remote meetings, however, don't forget that following best meeting planning and facilitating practices still applies; you may just need to adapt them to accommodate remote locations.

- Remember to schedule a specific time, confirm with all participants and mind any time-zone differences.
- Have a set agenda and share it with participants ahead of time and at the start of the meeting.
- Allow each participant to have at least one talking point so everyone feels engaged.
- Assign a note-taker and a time tracker and don't forget to provide all participants with a summary of what was discussed as well as who will be responsible for following-up on any agreed actions.
- Agree on ground rules such as: informing others when a new person enters or leaves the room and specifically address any no-muting or no-multitasking

expectations. Remind attendees of any items they might need to bring to fully benefit from and participate in the meeting.

- If you are facilitating the meeting, make sure all participants are part of the conversation. Be especially mindful if you have a combination of local and virtual participants.

As we continually place more demands on our time and as the workplace becomes more globalized, the use of technology for communication becomes increasingly prevalent. Let's maximize the use of that technology but let's also harness its potential to ensure that our communications are not only efficient but effective.

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