

Communication Channels:

*Is E-mail the Productive Choice?*

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I'm often asked under what circumstances is e-mail the best choice to communicate at work. My standard answer begins with "it depends on the message."

Before e-mail became a workplace staple we seemed to know instinctively how to navigate our communication channels. We didn't deliver complex reports verbally in meetings nor did we prepare a written memorandum asking a colleague out for lunch that day. E-mail's advent has indeed transformed our workplace communication practices.

In e-mails' halcyon days during the mid to late 1990's, we were enamored with the choice of sending electronic messages. Our current realities at work are now quite different, somehow more evolved – there are too many e-mail that either over or under deliver on their intended message. Ironically, receiving these types of electronic messages renders the communication not only inefficient, but also costs real corporate time and money.

A message that over-delivers is the e-mail jammed with too much content on a myriad of divergent issues. The issues could be anything from preparations for upcoming meetings and presentations to strategic and resource planning through to filling in a maternity leave with a contract employee. For the receiver, this e-mail is so laden with documented information that the opportunity for discussion has been bypassed - it's almost as if you've suddenly become a virtual colleague or employee.

A message that under-delivers is the e-mail that should have been a conversation. Many of these messages deal with contentious issues, but some may deal with positive news. For instance, the message "Congratulations, you've been promoted," while really good news, might seem less so if sent by e-mail. As in the case with the over-delivered message, the intention in the receivers' mind is unclear and is now supplanted instead with trying to decode the real meaning.

The messages "that should never have been" are the ones which have become the most time-consuming and unproductive. It's as if an extra burden is now placed on the receiver to fill in the gaps. The act of communication is occurring, but not the art. The platform for effective communication rests on the channels we choose for our messages. This is where the real efficiencies are found. It's also one of the major reasons that legitimate e-mail use has now become such a chore – we often mismatch the channel with the message.

If this principle sounds familiar, we can look to Marshall McLuhan, who in the early 1960's coined the phrase "the medium is the message." His meaning was very clear – the medium or channel we choose to communicate provides important clues that reinforce and complete the intent of our messages. Given the array of options we now have at our disposal, channel choice is just as important as a well-crafted message. More so when we know that these same channel choices are available to message senders – this is where the real burden of proof rests.

In our earlier example of the promotion news delivered by e-mail, if we knew our boss was away on a business trip in a remote locale, then the channel might be acceptable to us. Attempting to connect by telephone during your business hours, leaving a subsequent voice-mail would have more impact because this is the most personal gesture possible under the circumstances. This scenario changes, however, when we know our boss is in the office and available to speak with us in person. Not choosing face-to-face actually impacts both morale and productivity.

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Sending an e-mail is more expeditious; yet our concerns are raised at being relegated to a lesser communication channel. This is borne out by the common pet peeve of receiving an e-mail from a colleague sitting two offices away – what comes to mind first is why they didn't get up from behind their desks and ask us personally. It's even more ironic when the message is about getting together for lunch or drinks after work.

To make an informed and productive choice, we need some guidelines on which channels work with different types of messages.

The face-to-face channel permits us to be at our most expressive because we have the benefit of both verbal and non-verbal cues. Meetings using this channel are best for developing relationships, generating ideas, negotiating, sales, problem-solving, conflict resolution, discussing workplace performance and delivering negative or sensitive news. What's common here is our ability to engage in discussion, give and take, questioning for clarity and spontaneous exchanges that may arise as new information is revealed. Using e-mail for these situations blocks the depth of information that can be covered, stanching the natural flow we require to probe and digest important issues.

The telephone, by definition, is the next best channel because we are connected in real time to another individual and their voice. Calls are best to explore specific requests for services, time-sensitive needs, fine-tuning of plans, clarifying content, and to reinforce and extend relationships. The common element here is the ability to receive immediate feedback or response, particularly in ongoing situations. The telephone allows us to show personal concern and interest. What's also interesting is that a number of survey respondents prefer e-mail over telephone use, so they don't have to engage in pleasantries within their own offices or get caught by voice-mail or phone-tag. The channel choice between telephone and e-mail is the most challenging; we should let the value of the relationship be our guide.

Written communication works best to convey information that requires careful study and evaluation. This channel transmits its own sense of respect and effort. The length of information is not the issue here – it can be anything from a one-page letter to a fifty page report. What is paramount for the written channel is our ability to interpret, learn, analyze, and arrive at conclusions and decisions. Written communication is frequently used to supplement information from other channels. It also confers authority in areas such as legal matters, consulting reports, contracts, and critical decisions. Given that e-mail is not a secure medium, written communication should be the default for sensitive and confidential matters involving personnel issues, competitive information, research findings or trade secrets.

So, what's left for the electronic communication channel? The best use of e-mail is to exchange specific information aimed at distinct audiences. It's especially good for routine or transactional matters where mutual interest, common understanding or context already exist. It is the most efficient way to transmit a relevant message to a small group of peers. Electronic communication is suitable for any fact-based information requests because non-verbal body language signals are not important here. This channel combines very well with others, either as a prelude to using a real-time medium like telephone or face-to-face, or as a discussion postscript, confirmation or fulfillment of an information request initiated through personal discussion.

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We can further the practice of efficient communication by selecting the appropriate channel for our responses and not simply matching the incoming original. For instance, we can respond to e-mail messages using more interactive channels to complete the information exchange. The key is to use all our available communication channels in their most productive, message-carrying capacities. Over and under use of any one of them creates inefficiencies.

The problem we face in our workplace is not those odd times where we try one channel to find that another works better. At issue is the chronic, institutionalized pattern of ineffective channel choices that on the surface seem very efficient, but are just another time-wasting trap. E-mail did not start out to become one of our workplace foes. It became that way because its use has gone unchecked.

Our channel choices also deserve a Spring cleaning.

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