

What is ahead...

- Communication Vehicles
- Effective Distance Communication
- Media and Tools – Usage Tips
- E-mail Etiquette
- Team Meetings
- Food for thought

Communication

Communication Vehicles

There are three broad categories of communication technologies in a virtual environment. They are:

- Desktop videoconferencing systems
- Collaborative software systems
- Internet / Intranet systems

In addition, virtual teams use the same communication tools as traditional teams (fax, email, voicemail, teleconferencing (audio), videoconferencing, and sometimes face-to-face meetings). Most of the time, traditional face-to-face cues are gone. Decision-making software allows for anonymity and loss of distinction among members' social and expert status. However, this often leads to greater participation in work and decision-making leading to enhanced organizational democracy.

Effective Distance Communication

Four principles for effectively communicating at a distance:

- Standards for availability and acknowledgement are defined and respected.
- Team members replace lost context in their communication.
- Team members regularly use synchronous communication.

Senders take responsibility for prioritizing their communication; what is “pushed” (e.g. email and voicemail) vs. what is “pulled” (e.g. bulletin board and Intranet).

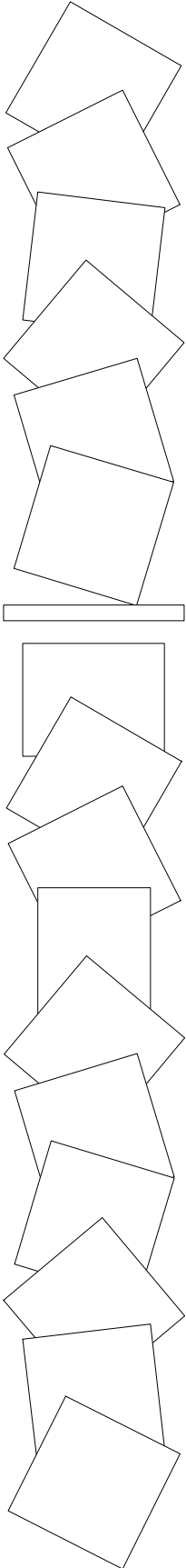
Communication Media and Tools – Usage Tips

Communication Media and Tools	Usage Tips
<p>Face-to-face Meetings - <i>Meeting person to person at the same location.</i></p> <p>Comments – richest medium for communication (visual and verbal cues, most personal, best opportunity for relationship building especially if agenda supports it with less structured and informal group activities).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To make the best use of the time and travel expense, be prepared. ▪ Know your audience and involve the team in planning the agenda. ▪ Make the purpose of the meeting clear, and state it in the agenda. ▪ Send out the agenda in advance, and make sure to include time to be a team. ▪ If this is not an option, or cannot be scheduled on a regular basis, look for other ways of building constructive relationships. Alternatives may include phone, video and teleconferencing.
<p>Video Conferencing – <i>Teleconferencing conducted by television.</i></p> <p>Comments - rich medium for communication (includes visual and verbal cues, interaction). Allows for instant communication and is more difficult for group members to check out.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plan time for set-up in case of technical difficulties. Have a back-up plan in case of trouble. ▪ Think about room set-up. Make sure that everyone is visible to those at other locations. ▪ Focus the camera as close to the people’s faces as possible, so those at other locations can see facial expressions. ▪ Make sure that microphones are placed so that all speakers can be heard. ▪ Keep the volume at your location on mute when no one is speaking to reduce feedback. ▪ Make use of audio/visual equipment. Take advantage of the medium to include visual elements. ▪ Be prepared for a slight time delay between the arrival of picture and words. If team members use a visual cue to get the speaker’s attention (such as raising hands) talking over one another can be minimized. ▪ Make sure to get meeting materials to team members ahead of time. ▪ Interact with team members in other locations—it can be tempting to focus only on those in the room with you. ▪ Don’t expect the dynamics to be the same as if everyone were in the same room. ▪ DO proceed to closure more slowly, perhaps polling each location to ensure all opinions have been considered. ▪ Raise your hand to be recognized.

Communication Media and Tools	Usage Tips
<p>Video Conferencing (cont.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Define the terms you're using. ▪ Develop a visual signal, like thumbs up or down, to indicate yes or no.
<p>Telephone Conference Calls – <i>Conducting a meeting over the phone, often using a dial-in number.</i></p> <p>Comments - rich medium for communication (includes verbal cues, interaction). Relatively inexpensive, reliable, available.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Close your office door if using a speaker phone or consider using a headset if in cubicle or open space office. ▪ Announce your name when joining a call. ▪ Keep the phone on mute to minimize background noise when you aren't speaking. ▪ It may be best for everyone to dial in to a conference number rather than calling an individual's office or being conferenced in by someone on the team. This helps avoid delays if people are late and also reduces the chance that no one feels like an outsider calling into a central or more important location. ▪ Don't discount the loss of visual cues like body language. To make up for the loss, be more conscious of asking how people are reacting to a topic. Try to solicit feedback when there is unexpected silence. ▪ Allow plenty of time for pre-work by sending documents out in advance (determine timeframe as a team). ▪ Call in early/on time to show respect for others. ▪ Complete pre-work to be prepared for discussions and plan your comments ahead of time. ▪ Facilitator needs a list of participants to verify attendance and address specific questions to individuals as needed. ▪ Take time to genuinely recognize those who called in at inconvenient times. ▪ Consider need for relationship building by making time to be a team on the agenda.
<p>Voicemail – <i>Communication by telephone messaging.</i></p> <p>Comments - lean medium for communication (more personal than e-mail, but no interaction). Allows for contact even if person is unavailable, and allows for notification of urgent needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make sure the message is relevant so it does not waste the recipient's time. ▪ Think through the message before calling to leave a message. View the message as a mini-speech or news report. ▪ State the topic up front so recipients know what's coming. ▪ Identify key points and key messages ahead of time. ▪ Include action items and next steps.

Communication Media and Tools	Usage Tips
<p>Voicemail (cont.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Critical messages should be sent in tandem with e-mail or another type of communication. ▪ May be very useful for team members in different time zones, but don't rely on this to replace one-to-one communication. ▪ You can send, forward, or reply to a voicemail to individuals at networked locations (see note at right).
<p>E- - <i>Messages that are sent and received</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>-mail etiquette page for further</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">- lean me (no visual or verbal cues, no interaction). E- receipt is an option that allows the sender to verify whether the message has been opened.</p> <p>weekly or monthly activity reports, as well as newsletters.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ —put action items at the top of ▪ Don't overuse. Utilize proper etiquette for usage. ▪ involved. Use guidelines, (e.g.), after 3 4 iterations of -to face. E mail may dampen or sharpen the tone of a message and may result in ▪ Be aware of how the use of "return receipt" may be interpreted by others. ▪ and aware of how others view your "cc." ▪
<p>Fax - <i>A facsimile is a copy of material that is transmitted. It can be sent in either paper received as a paper copy.</i></p> <p>Comments - lean medium for communication (no visual or verbal cues, no interaction).</p> <p>timely. When a paper (or "hard) copy is needed quickly, or when an electronic copy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use for static documents or when an ▪ Identify who will be reading your print communication or who <i>should</i> it. Tailor your message to their concerns and interest. ▪ information to a fax. Others in the work to, may see it.
<p style="text-align: center;">- <i>Mail sent through the post or interoffice</i></p> <p>Comments - (no visual or verbal cues, no interaction).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use for static documents, plans, reports, and historical records. Determine your objectives, and keep them • Invest time in writing a second draft— may want to get a colleague to review it and provide feedback to make sure your message is clear.
<p style="text-align: center;">- <i>A set of problem solving tools that run on electronic meetings to occur.</i></p>	<p>Ensure that participants have appropriate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide training for software use, if necessary.

Communication Media and Tools	Usage Tips
<p>Groupware (cont.)</p> <p>Comments - Allows for sharing of files, concurrent brainstorming, and better documentation. May reduce e-mail volumes with large attachments since these can be filed on a shared database.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Circulate any pre-work well in advance of the meeting.
<p>Electronic White Board - <i>A large, movable white board that plugs into a socket and is used to capture information and print it off at that moment.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May be used during meetings to capture information that would otherwise be captured on a flipchart. ▪ Copies may quickly be transmitted to remote participants.



E-Mail Etiquette

When sending an e-mail messages

- Use the subject line to indicate key information, assuming the receiver may be scanning multiple message lines.
- Don't attach large files without approval from the recipient; they can be difficult to download.
- Assume the message is permanent; don't send anything confidential or personal.
- Choose your recipients carefully; don't overload people with information they don't need.
- Use a conversational but courteous tone. Recognize that all capital letters or large font sizes mean you're screaming!
- Clearly indicate when you are expressing your opinion and when you are sharing facts.
- Do not rant or use offensive language.
- Get to the point. Limiting your message to one screen of text is a good rule of thumb.
- Use e-mail to foster connections, not to avoid face-to-face encounters.
- Use e-mail creatively; for instance, to offer feedback, to brainstorm electronically, and to give brief, on-line training sessions.
- Use "emoticons" to add expression to your email. :-) means "get it?" or "just joking!"; ;) is a wink, :-(expresses sadness or disappointment, g> is a grin.
- When posting to a discussion group, stay on the topic. Others may see it as rude to introduce something already discussed or off-topic dialogue. If the group has a list of frequently asked questions, consult it before entering the dialogue.

When receiving e-mail messages

- Respond with the "reply" button to ensure all addresses are automatically included with the return message.
- Promptly forward messages intended for others.
- Promptly respond to messages – within 24-48 hours. (But if a message angers or upsets you, give yourself time to relax and reflect before answering.)
- Watch out for unsolicited attachments. Don't download them because they may include a virus.
- Don't interrupt your work whenever a message arrives.
- Leave an extended absence greeting on your e-mail if you are on vacation or away from the office for an extended period of time.

Adapted : Essex, Louellen and Kusy, Mitch (1999). Fast Forward Leadership. England: Biddles,Ltd, Guildford & Kings Lynn.

Effective Virtual Team Meetings

Four major roles to be fulfilled for effective virtual team meetings:

- Owner: defines objectives and outcomes; works with facilitator to develop agenda and action items.
- Participant: prepares for meeting; participates fully.
- Facilitator: matches technology to the goals of the meeting; tests the technology prior to the meeting; responsible for meeting process (similar to face-to-face role).
- Technologist: serves the meeting; should increase productivity. If technology is complex, a separate facilitator, or “technographer” is sometimes used to focus solely on the technology (is typically not a team member).

Five activities for *all* virtual meetings:

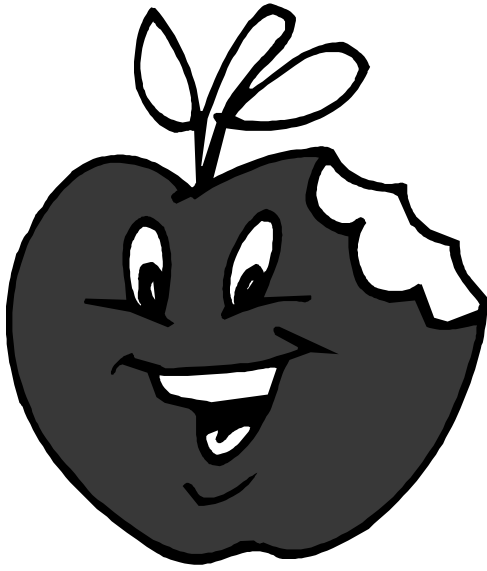
- Selecting the appropriate technology and type of interaction (real time or asynchronous), given the purpose of the meeting; match the technology to specific agenda items and facilitation goals.
- Manage the agenda, the participants, and the technology.
- Leverage the agenda and use of technology to maximize recall, the opportunity to contribute, motivate, and reduce social pressure.
- Make use of social protocols and best practices for selected technology.
- Facilitating the effective use of technology; have a backup or contingency plan.

The following matrix from *Mastering Virtual Teams* (Duarte & Snyder, 1999) will assist the virtual team facilitator choose the appropriate technology based upon the purpose of the meeting:

Technology	Information Sharing	Discussion and Brainstorming	Collaborative Decision-Making	Collaborative Product Production
Voice mail	Somewhat effective	Not effective	Not effective	Not effective
Audio Conference	Effective	Somewhat effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
E-mail	Effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective	Not effective
Bulletin board	Somewhat effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective	Not effective
Real-time data conference (no audio or video)	Effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective	Somewhat effective
Video conference without shared documents	Effective	Somewhat effective	Effective	Note effective
Real-time data conference with audio/video and text and graphics support	Effective	Effective	Effective	Effective
Electronic meeting system with audio/video and text and graphics	Effective	Highly effective	Highly effective	Effective
Collaborative writing with audio/video	Effective	Effective	Somewhat effective	Highly effective

Here's another view from the same source. This table is labeled the *Meeting-Interaction Continuum*:

<i>Information Sharing</i>	<i>Brainstorming and Decision Making</i>	<i>Collaborative Work</i>
Low Interaction	Moderate Interaction	High Interaction
Voice mail	Electronic bulletin board	Real-time data conference with audio/video and text/graphic
E-Mail	Chat rooms	Whiteboards with audio/video link
	Video conference	Electronic meeting system (EMS) with audio/video and text and graphic support
	Audio conference	Collaborative writing tools with audio/video links
	Real-time data conference	



Food for Thought

There is some evidence to suggest that people can only take “virtual communication” for so long. Small ambiguities begin to creep into messages, people start to brood over what’s not being said, and issues begin to smolder. Eventually we all need to reconnect in person. We need a human moment; an authentic psychological encounter that can only happen when two people share the same physical space. When human moments are few and far between, self-doubt, boorishness, and abrasive curtness comes out in the best of people.

What do you think?