Advances in Information Technology: Influences on the Quantity and Quality of Communication in the Workplace

Fred C. Lunenburg
Sam Houston State University

ABSTRACT
Advancements in information technologies are continuing and are providing organization members with additional ways to communicate. Developments that illustrate the impact of information technology on interpersonal communication include e-mail, instant messaging, social networking, web logs (blogs), video conferencing, and computer slide presentations. Some of the electronic communication devices omit many verbal and most nonverbal cues that people use to acquire feedback. Preventing visibility and depersonalization in the workplace are concerns when using information technologies. Employees still need to exchange ideas face-to-face and develop a sense of teamwork.

Advances in technology have influenced the quantity and quality of communications in the workplace. Six developments that illustrate the impact of technology on communication are e-mail, instant messaging, social networking, internet or Web logs (blogs), video conferencing, and computer slide presentations (Ling, 2011). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Electronic Mail (e-mail)

Electronic mail (e-mail) uses the internet to send and receive computer-generated text and documents. As a communication tool, e-mail has a number of benefits. E-mail messages can be written quickly, edited, and stored. They can be distributed to one person or thousands of people with a click of a mouse. They can be read at any time by the receiver. The cost of sending e-mail messages to organization members is much less than the cost of printing, duplicating, and distributing a comparable letter or other document (Zeigler, 2011). There are some drawbacks to using e-mail; misinterpreting the message, communicating negative messages, sending emotionally-charged e-mails, privacy concerns, and overuse of e-mail (Freeman, 2012).
Instant Messaging

Instant messaging (IM) allows people who are online to share messages with one another instantaneously, without having to go through an e-mail system. Sending an instant message opens up a small onscreen window into which each party can type messages for the other to read. This makes it possible to exchange written notes in real time, as well as share Web links and files of all types. The use of IM is expected to grow rapidly, because IM is an inexpensive alternative to multiple telephone calls and travel; creates a document trail for future reference; offers integration with voice and video; and provides the capability of carrying on several IM conversations at the same time.

Text messaging is a variant of IM. Text messaging (also called SMS for Short Message Service), like e-mail but unlike IM, uses portable communication devices. IM is usually sent via desktop or laptop computer, whereas SMS is transmitted via cellphones or handheld devices such as iPhones (Hillebrand, 2011). IM and SMS are not likely to replace e-mail. E-mail is still a superior device for sending long messages that need to be saved.

Social Networking

Social networking is another emerging form of information technology. Two well-known social networking platforms are Facebook and MySpace. Facebook is composed of separate networks based on schools, companies, or regions (Perlman, 2011; Shih, 2011). MySpace profiles contain two sections: “About Me” and “Who I’d Like to Meet.” Profiles can also contain “Interests” and “Details” sections, photographs, blogs, and other information (Cole, Russell, & Whyte, 2010).

MySpace, compared to Facebook, is more likely to be used for personal reasons (Cole, Russell, & Whyte, 2010). In addition to Facebook and MySpace, professional networking sites have entered the marketplace. Companies such as Hewlett-Packard, IBM, and Microsoft have their own social networks. Public schools and universities are also entering the social networking arena.

Web Logs (Blogs)

Web logs (or blogs) are online diaries or journals created by people to express their personal thoughts and to comment on topics of interest to them. The benefits of blogs include the opportunity for people to discuss issues in a casual format. These discussions serve much like “chat groups” and thus can provide managers with insights from a wide segment of employees and clients. The two major pitfalls of blogs are the lack of legal guidelines regarding what can be posted online and the potential for employees to say negative things about their employer and the organization, as well as to leak confidential information (Getgood, 2011).
Some employees believe that the First Amendment gives them the right to say whatever they want on their personal blogs. Thus, many employers now monitor employees’ Web sites at work (Murray & Trudeau, 2012). Some organizations have instituted policies restricting employee blogging activities. If you plan on maintaining a personal blog, be sure to install a work-personal firewall.

**Videoconferencing**

*Videoconferencing* uses video and audio links together with computers to enable individuals in different locations to conduct meetings without getting together face to face. In the late 1990’s, video conferencing was conducted from special rooms equipped with television cameras. More recently, cameras and microphones are being attached to an individual’s computer monitor, allowing them to participate in long-distance meetings and training sessions without leaving their offices (Raylor, 2011; Cole, Ray, & Zanetis, 2010).

**Presentation Technology**

Computer-generated slide software, such as *PowerPoint*, is a mode of communication currently being used in board rooms, professional conferences, and employee meetings. Speakers supplement their talk with computer-generated slides and typically organize their presentations around their slides. Audiences have become accustomed to watching presentations accompanied by an assortment of eye-catching graphics (O’Leary, 2011; Toogood, 2011).

The communication challenge is that during these presentations, the predominant means of connection between sender and receiver should be eye contact, not the screen. The implication for presenters is to find a way to integrate speaking skills with the technology.

**Multi-Media Presentations**

Following are some suggestions for improving multi-media presentations (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

**Talk to the audience, not the screen.** A problem with computer-generated PowerPoint slides is that the speaker, as well as the audience, tend to focus on the slide. Minimize looking at the slide and spend time looking at the audience. This will make it easier to make eye contact with them.

**Provide your audience with your power point slides.** Make 3-6 slides per page. Some people like to follow the PowerPoint slides on screen. Others prefer to follow the hard copy and take notes. The hard copy also provides the audience with a “take away” from the meeting.
Reduce your power point slides to bulleted items. A rule of thumb is: include no more than 24 words per slide. Use a large enough font size for the slide to be viewed at a distance of at least 20 feet.

Keep the slide in view long enough for the audience to comprehend its meaning. All too often, slide presentations deteriorate into a continual array of flashings on the screen. Synchronize the slides with meaningful comments.

Practice learning the content of your talk (or presentation). If you cannot memorize the content, practice reading the presentation with as much enthusiasm—variation in pitch, tone, and modulation of your voice, as well as periodic eye contact with your audience—as possible. The trick to reading a talk (or presentation) is to appear not to be reading it.

During the question portion of your presentation, answer questions completely and succinctly. When answering the question, maintain eye contact with the questioner while periodically scanning the entire audience. In a large meeting, you might repeat the question for all to hear using a microphone.

Conclusion

Advancements in information technologies are continuing and are providing organization members with additional ways to communicate. Developments that illustrate the impact of information technology on interpersonal communication include e-mail, instant messaging, social networking, web logs (blogs), video conferencing, and computer slide presentations. The variety of communication tools enable employees to perform their work not just from their offices, but almost anywhere—in their vehicles, in restaurants, in customers’ offices, or in airports. Some of the electronic communication devices omit many verbal and most nonverbal cues that people use to acquire feedback. Preventing visibility and depersonalization in the workplace are concerns when using information technologies. Employees still need to exchange ideas face-to-face and develop a sense of teamwork.

References


