

Did You Get My Slack/Email/Text?

We are in the midst of a major transition from remote to hybrid work. As this shift is happening, it's essential for managers to establish norms around digital communication with their teams. Having a detailed guide will help ensure that everyone on your team is on the same page and has the same expectations — regardless of who is working from where. The author offers guidance for how to have these norm-establishing conversations and how to make sure your established norms then stick.

Back when we were in the office, we all knew the unwritten rules of communication. If someone had large headphones on, they probably were focused on work, and didn't want to be interrupted to gossip about the latest drama. Or if your team was about to have an important meeting with a client, you would quickly run through last-minute questions before walking into the room.

We all learned these communication norms by observing our colleagues. But now with the rapid shift to hybrid work there is a need to create new rules for digital communication. Somehow it seems that the more platforms we have at our disposal, the more complicated digital communication gets.

I published a research study with Quester this month called "The Digital Communication Crisis" to understand the challenges that we all face in workplace digital communication. Through a survey of almost 2,000 office workers, we found that over 70% experienced some form of unclear communication from their colleagues. This leads to the average employee wasting four hours per week on poor or confusing digital communications, which adds up to an average annual amount of \$188 billion wasted across the American economy.

Here's an example of one organization that was struggling with this very issue. The organization brought me in to assess a team's digital communication channels. The division leader wanted to know why there was so much daily dysfunction: missed deadlines, emails ignored, reports of uncomfortable chat room conversations, and a lot of peer-based passive-aggressiveness.

It didn't take me long to discover that the team in question was using its collaboration tools in every which way but the right one. In the team's hands, Microsoft Teams chat had become a devious way for members to avoid video-call collaboration. Members were also sharing the same messages and documents using multiple collaboration tools, making it hard for anybody to know where to go for what. Finally, some members were commenting on tasks using 10-word IM messages, without explaining if their message was an opinion or a request for action.

Eventually, the team and I created norms around the best, most proper use of every communication channel. Here's what we built:

Setting Collaboration Channel Norms

| Tool | When to use | Response time | Norms |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Instant messenger (IM) | <p>Time-sensitive, urgent messages</p> <p>Short and simple conversations</p> | ASAP | <p>Use with fewer than 6 people (otherwise call)</p> <p>Set your availability</p> <p>Avoid complicated questions or conversations that require visuals</p> |
| Email | <p>Provide directional, important, and timely information</p> <p>Ensure there's a record of your communication</p> <p>Direct the receiver to an online source for more information</p> | < 24 hrs; priority dependent | <p>Use identifiers in the subject line for urgency and response expectation</p> <p>Use to share attachments</p> <p>Avoid when immediate response is required</p> <p>Not for random chit-chat</p> |
| Video call | <p>Use for meetings, including external ones that could benefit from visual interaction (e.g., project check-ins, introductions, deck sharing)</p> | Schedule in advance; priority dependent | <p>Use mute if you're not talking</p> <p>Meeting host clarifies if video functionality is required for participation</p> <p>Record calls for those who miss them</p> |
| Text | <p>Time-sensitive, urgent messages</p> | Within 30 minutes if between 7AM and 7PM; priority dependent | <p>Use can be adjusted if it is the preferred communication for your manager</p> |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | Only use if you were unable to reach the person via other channels | | Avoid texting during meetings/working sessions |
| Source: Digital Body Language, by Erica Dhawan | | | © HBR.org |

Using this chart as your template, set guidelines for your own team. As I discuss in my new book, *Digital Body Language*, I recommend scheduling a meeting with the sole purpose of having this norm-establishing discussion. To foster an open dialogue, frame the meeting as a group brainstorm and working session. Here are a few questions to get the conversation going:

1. What's been the most collaborative experience you've had in each of these channels?
 - IM (Microsoft Teams, Slack, Skype, etc.)
 - Email
 - Video calls
 - Texting (if applicable)
2. Based on these positive experiences, what are the norms that we want to set up for each channel? (See the right-most column above for specific examples.) As you set up these guidelines, think about message length, complexity, and response time.
 - How long is too long for an IM message?
 - Do we want to put a limit on the number of people to include in a group IM?
 - When (if ever) is it appropriate to text someone?
 - What is the expected response time for emails?
3. When we transition to a hybrid office, how will we stay inclusive of our remote employees and avoid potential biases?
4. Given that many of us are working asynchronously, how will we be sure to communicate when we are working while still respecting everyone's personal time?

Once you've established your team's communication norms, the hard part is then making sure they stick — people have a habit of sliding back to their old ways. Mindful of this tendency, I worked with the team to identify two or three channel advocates whose role was to encourage best practices within each channel and give shout-outs to those who were modeling the right behaviors.

We also developed a practice designed to eliminate situations where individuals duplicated content unnecessarily across multiple channels by rolling out the hashtag #killduplication as a response when a message is sent on the wrong channel. If someone does not adhere to the latest hybrid collaboration norms, team members are encouraged to respond with “#killduplication” to make it less of a call out and more of a fun reinforcement to learn the new behavior. The #killduplication phrase is now a staple in the team culture, helping to eliminate wasted time and ensure colleagues optimize the use of each digital medium.

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