

2.5.14: Digital versus Traditional Communication

Learning Objectives

- Identify benefits of digital communication methods
- Identify benefits of traditional communication methods

Digital Communication Methods

The benefits of digital communication for society in general are nicely stated by Mitchell Kapor^[1]:

Digital communications media are inherently capable of being more interactive, more participatory, more egalitarian, more decentralized, and less hierarchical. As such, the types of social relations and communities which can be built on these media share these characteristics.

For the professional business environment, the four primary benefits of digital communication methods are as follows:

- Communication is instant and fast-paced.
- Communication is extensive.
- Communication is convenient.
- Communication contributes to positive social change.

Instant and Fast-Paced Communication

Communication using digital techniques is instant. As soon as the sender hits the **Submit**, **Enter**, or **Send** key, the message is available to the audience in a matter of microseconds. The business benefit of instant communication is obvious—little to no delay of valuable information being sent to individuals, customers, or the organization. Responding to a competitor's new product release, informing colleagues of project status, scheduling an “all-hands” meeting, and acknowledging a customer complaint are all accomplished nearly instantly.

Extensive Communication

Another benefit of digital business communication is that it is extensive. One email message or text message can be easily routed to thousands of employees at the same time. A post on social media can be seen by millions of customers. Never before have we had the “reach” that a single digital communication can provide. Additionally, digital communications can be extensive in their contents as well; while sending a printed forty-page report by mail has associated costs, it's virtually cost-free to send the same content digitally.

Convenient Communication

Digital business communication is convenient, which serves to foster better communication. For example, computer programmers can relay information to their development team with a few mouse clicks, which means that they are more likely to do so. Additionally, the fact that digital communication is instant and extensive also contributes to the convenience of using these techniques for anyone relaying information.

Communication for Change

Finally, the advent of digital communication in the business environment has contributed to positive social change and served to change the environment itself. Always being connected may not seem to be a benefit at first glance, but if that factors into more flexible work hours, employees may be happier at work. A team-oriented workforce, which tends to foster sharing and support among team members, has been shown to contribute to greater employee productivity and success. And who does not appreciate a shorter—or even non-existent—commute? Virtual and remote offices have also been credited with tangible benefits to employees.

Traditional Communication Methods

Traditional methods of business communication tend to mean paper-based messages such as formal letters, brochures, reports, proposals, and notes. Based on the advantages of using digital communication discussed above, why would we wish to continue to use traditional means?

There are several reasons why these traditional methods of communication still have their place:

- Reader preference
- Storage and archive
- Security
- Convenience
- Perception

Reader Preference

One of most important elements of any type of communication is how effective the message is. Communication is most effective when the message is clearly received by the intended audience. Some people prefer to read information from a sheet of paper rather than a device screen or prefer to read a novel from a hard-bound book versus a on a tablet device. Human senses come into play in communication, and touch is a very strong human trait. In communication, it's all about the receiver instead of the sender, so by putting the receiver of the communication first, the message will be more effective.

Storage and Archive

Another advantage of traditional communication methods is in the storage of documents. Many organizations today believe in having a hard-copy document to back up electronic records. Servers and mainframes have been known to crash with an ensuing loss of data. Despite the fact that emails, texts and other digital communication have been found to be legally binding, the storage and archiving of paper documents continues to be important since electronic storage is not foolproof.

Security

A third advantage of traditional communication techniques is closely related to data storage: data security. Data breaches and malicious hacker attacks have shown that no electronic record is completely safe, even with firewalls and cyber-security software.

Convenience

While convenience was listed above as a benefit of digital communication, it is also a benefit of traditional communication. In order to open an email or read a text or scan a social media post, you must have a functioning device that is connected to the internet. We all know that there are times when we are unable to be online thanks to poor signal coverage or the dreaded dead battery. There are even times when we wish to be disconnected on purpose to have a bit of a break.

Perception

Finally, traditional communication methods can make a good impression and improve the receiver's perception of the message sender. How many of us find it a little overwhelming to wade through a mountain of email, texts and social media posts every day? A simple thing like a business letter on upgraded stationery has been shown to differentiate a sender from others. A formal written proposal sent to a customer usually gets opened, in contrast to an email that is flagged for later or marked as unread. A hand-written note is almost always opened right away because of its novelty.

1. Kapor, Mitchell. *Electronic Frontier Foundation Information*, 1993.

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