

1.4.4: Staying Connected

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the importance of staying connected with colleagues and other professionals in the digital age
- Discuss the importance of staying connected with customers in the digital age

Connecting with Colleagues and Other Professionals

We live in a technological world, where teams of people can be collaborating and communicating from their respective offices, or even their couches and dining room tables, three thousand miles away from each other. And when you're working from your couch, without the opportunity to chat at the coffee machine or meet up for lunch, you're losing the opportunity to connect meaningfully with other people who have the same business interests, who can provide you with a set of amazing resources to help you succeed, and who look for your input and expertise to help them achieve their own goals.

Staying connected to people is more than just being able to do your job, it's about staying relevant and impactful and maintaining influence in your sphere—which can be hard to do from your dining room table. But conventional communication tools and approaches have been upended in favor of cutting edge digital alternatives that connect co-workers in these new and challenging circumstances. Let's look at some of these tools used to stay digitally connected with coworkers and other colleagues. We'll measure the methods of communication they aid and how well they facilitate the social communication model.

- **Document and work sharing tools:** Sharepoint and OneNote, both Microsoft products, are examples of tools that help you share work documents and collaborate on projects. Sharepoint allows you the ability to build a webpage for your department, house important and frequently used documents, and post basic, one-sided messages that are usually directly related to the content. OneNote performs a similar function but is more project oriented. The platform allows you to upload pictures and web links, create lists and to dos, and more. Neither of these projects allows for conversation, and they aren't meant to stand on their own as communication tools. In fact, because they're offered by Microsoft, usually other programs (like email) are integrated into them.
- **Private messaging and “chat” tools:** Private messaging and instant communication tools, like texting, require that the message be written. These tools allow for good, albeit sometimes slow, communication. The linear portion of communication (speaker–encoding–message–decoding–recipient) is easily facilitated in this method of communication, and “feedback” can be given, but “noise” is a frequent saboteur and not always easily identified. Why? Because non-verbal communication isn't present, tone of voice is not easily communicated, written messages can be misinterpreted as aggressive, angry and rude when they're not meant to be. Collaborative tools like [Slack](#) include a chat component into their platforms, but offer additional components that make communication more effective.
- **Video communication tools:** Skype, [Google Hangouts](#), and [Zoom](#), are examples of video communication tools that allow you to connect with people visually as well as aurally. Whether it's by chat room or simply dialing someone else with an account, you can have a decent conversation with coworkers as if they were in the room with you. The benefits are easy to see—not only is there the ability for verbal and listening communication, but nonverbal communication is apparent as well. Where a disembodied voice might agree to a decision, a video conference participant might send the non-verbal signal that she is not happy with the ending result. The visual bonus allows for heightened feedback in the social communication model, and the ability to clarify when noise exists. (See Module 9 for a lot more on video communication tools.)

You can communicate more effectively when you understand the strengths and pitfalls of these digital communication tools. Tools that facilitate multiple types of communication (verbal, listening, non-verbal) and allow the completion of the social communication model's circuit are more likely to aid you in getting your message across to your audience.

Connecting with Customers

Just as technology allows you to have a team of coworkers spread across the country or even the world, so does it allow for your customers to more easily access the products and services you offer. Staying connected with them is tantamount to staying connected with the team that helps you deliver those products and services.

Customers are looking for and using any of a number of methods of communication to interact with the brands, products and services they care about. In the age of social media, they're demanding conversation and human interaction. Digital communication

tools can provide those avenues, but they also need to facilitate various methods of communication and complete the social communication model's circuit if they're going to be effective.

Let's take a look at what's out there.

- **Project and document sharing tools:** These tools exist to help support your side of the conversation. Tools like Microsoft's Delve allow you to pull up all your documents and information by contact. Have a meeting with the XYZ Widget Company? Delve allows you to access all of your recent documents, show you records of past conversations and so on. This digital tool supports your communication with a customer, but it doesn't take you past the "message" part on the social communication model. Still, they're handy tools to use when preparing to communicate.
- **Websites:** Almost every company has one to provide their customers with information about their products and services, as well as how to contact the company. Usually they feature information they're legally required to supply, like annual reports and financial filings. Your company's web design communicates your brand promise and personality, but a website on its own is a one-sided form of communication. It's the digital equivalent of "hanging out your shingle" and doesn't provide any opportunity for feedback from its viewers.
- **Blogging and Social Media:** This is a passive form of communication to your customers, one-sided and allowing for almost minimal feedback. That aside, blogging and social media allow you to communicate new products and information to your customers and establish that all-important "personality" customers are looking for in companies today.
- **Private message and "chat" tools:** Tools like [Live Chat](#) and [Kayako](#) have taken the customer service world by storm. When visiting a company's website, customers have come to expect that there will be some sort of chat option to talk with a customer service representative. These programs allow for canned conversational openings and encourage visitors to the website to have a discussion with a company representative where one might not have otherwise occurred. Nonverbal communication is nonexistent in this platform, so "noise" is almost a given, but feedback can be collected, closing the social communication model's circuit.
- **Video chat:** There's a short list of companies that are employing video chat tools to deal with customer service matters, and doing so with great success. It's the next best thing to a face to face conversation and provides the communicators access to all methods of communication. The social communication model is easily closed with feedback on noise, and active listeners can take non-verbal cues into consideration. The same holds true for this tool where more robust relationships with customers are the foundation of the business—lawyers, teachers, and therapists are among the many professionals who rely on careful face-to-face communication to perform their jobs effectively, and this type of communication can definitely facilitate that.

Digital communication tools can be effective, and the more methods of communication they allow, the better they can close the social communication model's circuit, the better they are. Choose your digital tool wisely and leverage its features so that you can most clearly, concisely, and objectively convey your message.

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