

The right technology

Electronic communication has limitations

Question:

I am in a new role and face an interesting dilemma. The majority of my negotiations will be with distant clients who I will not be meeting face to face. Which technology is better: phone, video-conference, e-mail or instant messaging?

Answer:

The decision to select a technology is influenced by two factors. The first and most important is to ask your client which they prefer. The second is your level of comfort and competence with the technology.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each technology. Certain technologies can be powerful negotiation tools that save time and money. The same technology if not handled correctly, can become a distraction, create a misunderstanding or contribute to a sense of distrust. The choice of communication medium can affect the stability of your relationship, the quality of information shared, and the efficiency of the negotiation process.

Different communication mediums vary in terms of richness and potential to convey the sensation of social presence. Let's examine the benefits and disadvantages of each:

Phone

A recent study from Northwestern University found that vocal cues effectively "improve relations between negotiators and thus reduce the likelihood of an impasse." In

other words, how you say something, plays a critical role in your effort to secure a positive agreement. Be respectful and sincere. Mean what you say and say it with confidence.

Your tone of voice creates an impression. A deeper, firmer tone communicates confidence and competence. A high-pitched, shallow or squeaky voice projects weakness, indecision, and insecurity. Practice the voice intonation you want to achieve in your negotiation before you go live.

The phone also offers another important benefit – the opportunity for both parties to communicate in real time. In contrast to e-mail with which there is an inherent delay, a phone conversation facilitates an immediate, continuous exchange.

If you are using the phone to negotiate, buy a high-quality headphone set that eliminates background noise and allows you to walk around. You will come across as unprofessional if the other party hears chatter in the background. You might consider booking a conference room to minimize unplanned interruptions or loud noise. Using a headphone set allows you to move when talking. This can work to your advantage if you are someone who has high energy and needs to talk with your hands.

Video conference

A video conference permits negotiators to respond immediately to one another. This medium merges both vocal and physical elements – a key benefit when both parties are comfortable with the technology.

However, people who are new to video conferencing may find it distracting. They become self-conscious in front of the camera, which may cause them to slump their shoulders, look down at the floor or shift their eyes away. Unintentionally, this may be interpreted as a lack of confidence or uncertainty which causes a miscommunication.

In fact, visual cues can have a major

impact on decision-making abilities. Roderick Swaab of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management compared the first-ever televised debates between U.S. presidential candidates in 1960. Swaab wrote, "Studies of the audience after the first of four debates revealed that in the eye of the TV viewers, charismatic and confident John F. Kennedy was clearly victorious over the sullen Richard Nixon, who had a five o'clock shadow and was also underweight and pallid because he'd just spent two weeks in the hospital for a knee operation. Meanwhile, the radio listeners overwhelmingly chose Nixon as the winner. It has been argued that Nixon's points were more sound, logical and precise, suggesting that visual cues distracted the television audience from the debate's substance. Kennedy, of course, won the election."

E-mail

Conducting an entire negotiation via e-mail is high risk. A recent study (conducted by Justin Kruger of New York University, Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago, Zhi-Wen Ng and Justin Parker of the University of Illinois) showed conclusively that negotiations conducted via e-mail more often lead to an impasse or ineffective agreement than negotiations that take place in person. The removal of both voice and body language from a conversation "poses more problems than solutions. E-mail negotiations are fraught with misunderstanding because emotion and tone are difficult to convey accurately."

Instant messaging

Compared with e-mail communication, instant messaging enables negotiators to take advantage of instantaneous communications. It happens at a rapid fire rate that is often filled with abbreviations, sentence fragments and poor or non-existent punctuation. It is more often a VERY informal kind of com-

munication that lacks any type of permanent record.

If your negotiation is anything except a simple transaction, I would refuse to participate in any type of e-messaging – regardless of whether it's e-mail or instant. The risks of miscommunication and misunderstanding are far too great.

When deciding on the right technology, allow the other party to decide which technology they prefer. This will ensure that they feel comfortable and often results in a feeling of appreciation from the other side, as the right to choose the technology is often viewed as a concession.

Be sure to familiarize yourself with the technology before you go live. Test, re-test and test again so that you are confident the equipment will perform as expected. You never want the technology to undermine your ability to concentrate during the negotiation.



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