Navigating online and offline communications in the hybrid future

Lockdown suggests working from home will remain important, but will require more sophisticated communications skills to navigate effectively, say Bruce Cronin and Yildiz Betez

by Bruce Cronin and Yildiz Betez 31 May 2022

While 'Zoom fatigue', social isolation and blurred boundaries gnaw at the autonomy and flexibility of remote work, those involved report not only work-life balance improvements but also productivity gains.

But what about the less tangible side of work? Social bonding is important for business relationships, whether onboarding, motivating teams, or winning clients. Unstructured, serendipitous interactions foster learning, creativity and innovation. The move online has greatly disrupted this, with online tools often poor substitutes for in-person interaction.

Yet is this more than unfamiliarity with online communication? After all, international firms frequently communicate with colleagues and clients they never meet in person. By contrast, for most of the workforce the last two years has involved a steep learning curve in videoconferencing and chat. Perhaps our difficulty in interacting in more complex, less tangible ways online arises from limited experience.

Many believe that technical limitations make online tools less effective than in-person communication. Online tools have lower 'bandwidth', limiting 'rich' communications that exploit cues from body language, tone and emotion. Some tools like email or chat are very 'lean', providing only written cues that can be misinterpreted absent of emotional context. Video calls provide more visual and aural cues but still fall short of 'being there'.

Then again, are we really so limited in online communications? Consider the way a teenager uses texting to maintain a range of friendships. They adroitly convey emotion ("OMG!"), empathy ("LOL"), irony, sarcasm, in/out group acronyms, emojis or in-jokes, and manage relationships through the rate of reciprocation.

Researchers report the way communication tools are used, more than technical capabilities, affects communication richness. Like in-person interaction, online communication is a learned skill. People differ in experience and expertise in using various tools and combining these effectively. And as communication is a two-way street, tools are best deployed responsively to the skills of both parties. This concerns not just technical skills but reinforcement of cues in combination of channels.

For most, the 2020 rapid move online involved ad-hoc adoption of the tools on hand. Where training was provided, this focused on basic technical proficiency. Employees relied on their existing preferences in online communications; instant messaging practices, for example, drawing from personal social interactions. Higher order skills in navigating multiple online channels are barely considered.

This was the case for the mid-sized legal practice Thackray Williams. With the government 'stay at home' order in March 2020, the firm supplemented legacy online tools with a set of procedures to keep its 150 staff integrated while individually working at home. These included a bi-weekly 'state of the nation' address by the managing partner to all the staff over Zoom; weekly Zoom team tea breaks; weekly one-to-one telephone catch-ups with each staff member; regular staff surveys; and online social events such as a ghost tour of London, a Christmas party and live music.

A year into working from home, Thackray Williams started preparations for 'new normal' hybrid working practices. A new state-of-the art workplace was commissioned, moving its head office to a new building, which supports the shift to hybrid working with a mix of open plan and quiet spaces, an in-house café and break out rooms, and meeting rooms for face to face and/or online meetings.

Thackray Williams also worked with University of Greenwich researchers to take stock of the way communications had developed during lockdown and to consider effective practices for a hybrid future. The researchers asked staff across the firm about their work and social interactions at work during lockdown and their use of different communications channels for this.

Despite concerns that working from home was less effective than working in the office, we found the move online did not reduce performance and, in some respects, enhanced it. We also found little evidence that the social interchange important to innovation was stifled. Staff used online tools to tap into diverse information outside their regular workflow. Most reported high performance with the move online; two-thirds reported improved productivity; one third reported better access to information and learning online.

The researchers were surprised by Thackray Williams' successful adaptation, prompting them to double-check the data. The team attributed this to the evident open, low-hierarchical, people-orientated culture.

Importantly, the staff reporting improved access to information, advice and learning were those who used multiple channels to interact socially outside of workflow tasks. These were those combining instant messaging and video calls; this combination both alerts staff to valuable information outside their immediate work group and allows them to harvest this individually.

But these benefits were limited to those able to effectively deploy these tools. This left a general longing for richer communications to support bonding, socialising, accessing advice, guidance, learning and bouncing ideas and a particular need for unscheduled, spontaneous access to others to question, catchup, chat or joke.

The research demonstrates clear organisational and personal benefits from working from home but in-person interaction remains highly valued. The office still calls for the structure it contributes to working life, the normalisation of formal and informal work practices and the amorphous benefits of 'hanging out'. But some employees need this more than others. Like all workplaces, employees differ in ease and skill in utilising various communication channels, which needs to be accommodated in any future hybrid organisational strategy.

How can organisations foster the important social side of work in hybrid on/offline situations? This experience suggests a **RAPID** solution:

- **R**ecognise that social interaction develops in all parts of work, not just in organised events, online and in-person, and this contributes greatly to learning and innovation performance, not just team bonding.
- **A**ppreciate that online communication is more than a technical issue; like in-person communication it involves learnable skills and some are more skilled than others.
- **P**rovide regular opportunities for safe, in-person informal social interactions to address the longing for richer communications, catch-up and informal knowledge exchange.
- **I**dentify the most effective online communicators, gather best practices and develop training programmes to share these. There is clear value in effectively combining video calls and instant messaging.
- **D**eploy multi-channel communications platforms that integrate online and in-person communications, such as hybrid-equipped meeting rooms, allowing staff to interact flexibly for both workflow and social purposes.

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