

# Communicating in Teams and Organizations

## learning objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- 9-1 Explain why communication is important in organizations, and discuss four influences on effective communication encoding and decoding.
- 9-2 Compare and contrast the advantages of and problems with electronic mail, other verbal communication media, and nonverbal communication.
- 9-3 Discuss the relevance of synchronicity, social presence, social acceptance, and media richness when choosing the preferred communication channel.
- 9-4 Discuss various barriers (noise) to effective communication, including cross-cultural and gender-based differences in communication.
- 9-5 Explain how to get your message across more effectively, and summarize the elements of active listening.
- 9-6 Summarize effective communication strategies in organizational hierarchies, and review the role and relevance of the organizational grapevine.

**S**tewart Butterfield dislikes email. “When I open my email it’s a giant casserole of email from family, friends, people we work with outside our organization. . . . It’s garbled,” complains the Silicon Valley entrepreneur who cofounded Flickr and more recently Slack. Butterfield (shown in photo) also dislikes how email directs messages to specific people that others cannot later access. “In email-based organizations, whether you are the chief executive or a junior employee, you have a very narrow slice and everything else is forever opaque for you.”

Butterfield believes that the future of organizational communication is a real-time channel-based platform, such as Slack, in which anyone can create a channel and invite others into its conversations. “It’s a messaging app for teams that is meant to encompass the whole spectrum of communications,” Butterfield enthuses. “It’s all your communication

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in one place, instantly searchable, and available wherever you go.” Slack is mainly instant messaging with fun emojis (smileys) and automated links to other information sources, but it will soon include video messages and video calls. With more than 3 million daily users just two years after its launch, Slack is the fastest-growing platform for internal organizational communication.

Slack says its platform boosts team productivity by about one-third, mainly by reducing internal email and meetings. However, a few users claim that this communication medium produces information overload. Real-time, channel-based communication assumes employees are always there to respond to messages across dozens of conversation channels. “With Slack, we were more connected than we ever were before,” says Dave Teare, founder of password protection firm AgileBits. “[But] being connected doesn’t magically enable effective communication. . . . It multiplexed my brain and left me in a constant state of anxiety.” AgileBits reluctantly abandoned Slack for other platforms with less communication intensity.

According to one estimate, Slack cuts traditional meetings by 25 percent. Yet even the most digitally savvy companies using Slack still value face-to-face communication. “When my engineering team has to decide what they want to build in the next two weeks, this is hard to do without meetings,” admits Octavian Costache, cofounder and chief technology officer of Manhattan shopping start-up Spring. “There’s so much



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Slack and other channel-based platforms have become hugely popular communication tools in contemporary organizations, but they also have limitations that are minimized by including more traditional forms of communication.

volume of information [in face-to-face gatherings] . . . I have this image of a giant pipe, so much richness. It couldn't go on Slack.”<sup>1</sup>

Organizations are currently experiencing a turbulent change in how employees communicate with each other. High-quality videoconferences, channel-based text messaging systems, sophisticated corporate-strength social media, smartphone videos and messages, and other methods didn't exist a decade ago. Indeed, many organizations in the United States and other countries are still struggling with whether—let alone determining how—to incorporate these new ways of interacting in the workplace. Emerging communication channels offer significant potential for information sharing and social bonding. Equally important, the workforce increasingly uses and expects organizations to provide these communication channels.

**communication**  
the process by which  
information is transmitted  
and *understood* between  
two or more people

**Communication** refers to the process by which information is transmitted and *understood* between two or more people. We emphasize the word *understood* because transmitting the sender's intended meaning is the essence of good communication. This chapter begins by discussing the importance of effective communication, outlining the communication process model, and discussing factors that improve communication coding and decoding. Next, we identify types of communication channels, including email and social media, followed by factors to consider when choosing a communication medium. The chapter then identifies barriers to effective communication. The latter part of the chapter looks at communication in organizational hierarchies and offers insight about the pervasive organizational grapevine.

## The Importance of Communication

9-1

Effective communication is vital to all organizations, so much so that no company could exist without it. The reason? Recall from Chapter 1 that organizations are defined as groups of people who work interdependently toward some purpose. People work interdependently only when they can communicate with each other. Although organizations rely on a variety of coordinating mechanisms (which we discuss in Chapter 13), frequent, timely, and accurate communication remains the primary means through which employees and work units effectively synchronize their work.<sup>2</sup> Chester Barnard, a telecommunications CEO and a pioneer in organizational behavior theory, made this observation back in 1938: “An organization comes into being when there are persons able to communicate with each other.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to coordination, communication is critical for organizational learning. It is the means through which knowledge enters the organization and is distributed to employees.<sup>4</sup> A third function of communication is decision making. Imagine the challenge of making a decision without any information about the decision context, the alternatives available, the likely outcomes of those options, or the extent to which the decision is achieving its objectives. All of these ingredients require communication from coworkers

HOW WELL DO ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?<sup>5</sup>

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and stakeholders in the external environment. For example, airline cockpit crews make much better decisions—and thereby cause far fewer accidents—when the captain encourages the other pilots to openly share information.<sup>6</sup>

A fourth function of communication is to change behavior.<sup>7</sup> When conveying information to others, we are often trying to alter their beliefs, feelings, and ultimately their behavior. This influence process might be passive, such as merely describing the situation more clearly and fully. But communication is often a deliberate attempt to change someone's thoughts and actions. We will discuss the topic of persuasion later in this chapter.

A fifth function of communication is to support employee well-being.<sup>8</sup> One way communication minimizes stress is by conveying knowledge that helps employees better manage their work environment. For instance, research shows that new employees adjust much better to the organization when coworkers communicate subtle nuggets of wisdom, such as how to complete work procedures correctly, find useful resources, handle difficult customers, and avoid office politics.<sup>9</sup> The second way communication minimizes stress is emotionally; talking with others can be a soothing balm during difficult times. Indeed, people are less susceptible to colds, cardiovascular disease, and other physical and mental illnesses when they have regular social interaction.<sup>10</sup> In essence, people have an inherent drive to bond, to validate their self-worth, and to maintain their social identity. Communication is the means through which these drives and needs are fulfilled.

## A Model of Communication

To understand the key features of effective interpersonal communication, let's examine the model presented in Exhibit 9.1, which provides a useful "conduit" metaphor for thinking about the communication process.<sup>11</sup> According to this model, communication flows through one or more channels (also called *media*) between the sender and receiver. The sender forms a message and encodes it into words, gestures, voice intonations, and other symbols or signs. Next, the encoded message is transmitted to the intended receiver through voice, text, nonverbal cues, or other channels. The receiver senses and decodes the incoming message into something meaningful. Ideally, the decoded meaning is what the sender had intended.

In most situations, the sender looks for evidence that the other person received and understood the transmitted message. This feedback may involve the receiver repeating the message back to the sender or demonstrating awareness of the message indirectly through the receiver's subsequent actions. Notice that feedback repeats the communication process. Intended feedback is encoded, transmitted, received, and decoded from the receiver to the sender of the original message.

This model recognizes that communication is not a free-flowing conduit. Rather, the transmission of meaning from one person to another is hampered by *noise*—the psychological, social, and structural barriers that distort and obscure the sender's intended message. If any part of the communication process is distorted or broken, the sender and receiver will not have a common understanding of the message.

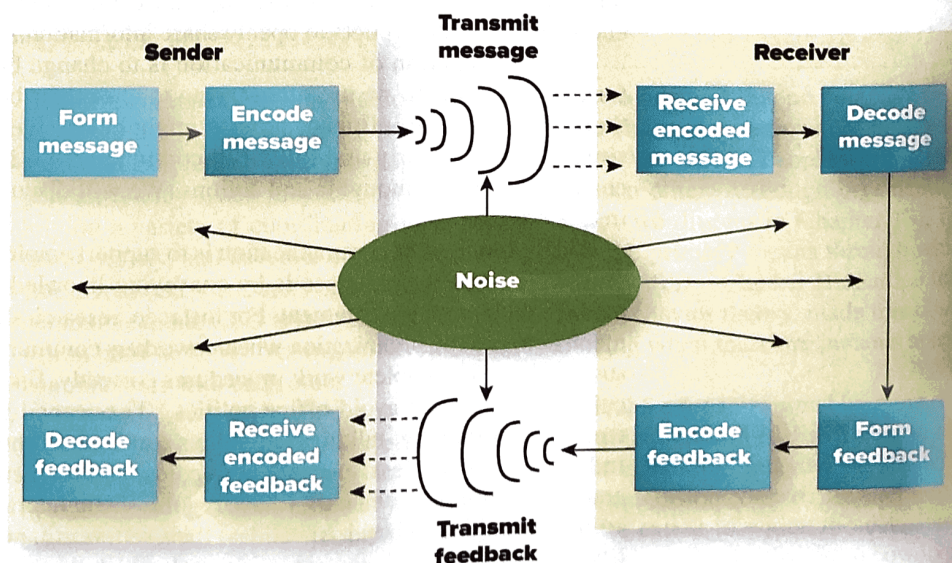
### INFLUENCES ON EFFECTIVE ENCODING AND DECODING

According to the communication process model, effective communication depends on the sender's and receiver's ability, motivation, role clarity, and situational support to efficiently and accurately encode and decode information. Four main factors influence the effectiveness of this encoding-decoding process.<sup>12</sup>

First, the sender and receiver encode and decode more effectively when they have similar "codebooks," which are dictionaries of symbols, language, gestures, idioms, and other tools used to convey information. With similar codebooks, the communication participants are able to encode and decode more accurately because they assign the same or similar meaning to the transmitted symbols and signs. Communication efficiency also

EXHIBIT 9.1

#### The Communication Process Model



In most hospitals, medical staff must transmit medical orders and patient updates using internal phones and pagers. But hospital leaders at St. Luke's Medical Center in Boise, Idaho, discovered that the younger physicians and nurses were communicating through text messages using their personal smartphones. This practice was highly efficient and more comfortable for users, but it violated industry regulations because medical information was sent through public networks, which could potentially be stolen. Rather than banning text messages, St. Luke's set up a secure texting system for the hospital. A St. Luke's executive explains why: "When people are trying to do the best they can for the patient, they're going to try to find a workaround. . . . Let's not stop it. Let's figure out how we can do it legally and correctly." In other words, St. Luke's will likely experience better communication among medical staff because they are proficient and motivated to use text messages compared to phone calls and pagers.<sup>14</sup>

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improves because there is less need for redundancy (repeating the message in different ways) and less need for confirmation feedback ("So, you are saying that...?").

Second, the encoding–decoding process improves with experience because the sender learns which words, symbols, voice intonations, and other features transmit the message more clearly and persuasively to others. Third, the encoding–decoding process is better when the sender and receiver are skilled and motivated to use the selected communication channel(s). Some people prefer face-to-face conversations, others prefer tweets and text messages, and still others prefer writing and receiving detailed reports. Even when the sender and receiver have the same codebooks, the message can get lost in translation when one or both parties use a channel that they dislike or don't know how to use very well.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, the encoding–decoding process depends on the sender's and receiver's shared mental models of the communication context. Mental models are visual or relational images of the communication setting, whereas codebooks are symbols used to convey message content (see Chapter 3). For example, a Russian cosmonaut and American astronaut might have shared mental models about the layout and features of the international space station (communication context), yet they experience poor communication because of language differences (i.e., different codebooks). Shared mental models potentially enable more accurate transmission of the message content and reduce the need for communication about the message context.

## Communication Channels

9-2

A central feature of the communication model is the channel (also called the *medium*) through which information is transmitted. There are two main types of channels: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication uses words, so it includes spoken or written channels. Nonverbal communication is any part of communication that does not use words. Spoken and written communication are both verbal (i.e., they both use words), but they are quite different from each other and have different strengths and weaknesses in communication effectiveness, which we discuss later in this section. Also, written communication has traditionally been much slower than spoken communication at transmitting messages, although electronic mail, Twitter tweets, and other online communication channels have significantly improved written communication efficiency.

## INTERNET AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

In the early 1960s, with funding from the U.S. Department of Defense, university researchers began discussing how to collaborate better by connecting their computers through a network. Their rough vision of connected computers became a reality in 1969 as the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). ARPANET initially had only a dozen or so connections and was very slow and expensive by today's standards, but it marked the birth of the Internet. Two years later, using that network, a computer engineer sent the first electronic mail (email) message between different computers on a network. By 1973, most communication on ARPANET was through email. ARPANET was mostly restricted to U.S. Defense-funded research centers, so in 1979 two graduate students at Duke University developed a public network system, called Usenet. Usenet allowed people to post information that could be retrieved by anyone else on the network, making it the first public computer-mediated social network.<sup>15</sup>

We have come a long way since the early days of ARPANET and Usenet. Instant messaging, social media, and other contemporary activities didn't exist in organizations a dozen years ago, whereas they are now gaining popularity. However, email is still the medium of choice in most workplaces.<sup>16</sup> Email messages can be written, edited, and transmitted quickly. Information can be effortlessly appended and conveyed to many people. Email is also asynchronous (messages are sent and received at different times), so there is no need to coordinate a communication session. With advances in computer search technology, email software has also become a somewhat efficient filing cabinet.<sup>17</sup>

Email is the preferred medium for sending well-defined information for decision making. It is also the first choice for coordinating work, although text messages may soon overtake email for this objective. The introduction of email has substantially altered the directional flow of information as well as increased the volume and speed of those messages throughout the organization.<sup>18</sup> In particular, email has reduced face-to-face and telephone communication but increased communication with people further up the hierarchy. Email potentially improves employee-manager relations, except where these messages are used by the manager to control employee behavior.

Several studies suggest that email reduces social and organizational status differences between sender and receiver, mainly because there are fewer cues to indicate these differences than in face-to-face interactions. However, status differences still exist to some extent in written digital communication.<sup>19</sup> For instance, one recent study found that managers signaled their status by replying to emails less quickly and with shorter messages. Even text messages can convey status differences. Emerging evidence suggests that people assign higher status to senders of messages that include an elite signature (e.g., "Sent from my iPhone").

Email and other forms of written digital communication potentially reduce stereotyping and prejudice because age, race, and other features of the participants are unknown or less noticeable.<sup>20</sup> Text messages and emails allow more time to craft diplomatic messages than in face-to-face interactions. However, diplomatic writing mainly occurs when there is potential conflict or perceived prejudice. In other situations, the lack of face-to-face contact may increase reliance on stereotypes and produce messages that reflect those biases.

## PROBLEMS WITH EMAIL AND OTHER DIGITAL MESSAGE CHANNELS

Email, text messages, and other written digital message channels dominate organizational communication, but they have several limitations. Here are the top four complaints:

**Poor Communication of Emotions** People rely on facial expressions and other nonverbal cues to interpret the emotional meaning of words; email and text messages lack this parallel communication channel. Indeed, people consistently and significantly

overestimate the degree to which they understand the emotional tone of digital messages.<sup>21</sup> Senders try to clarify the emotional tone of their messages by using expressive language (“Wonderful to hear from you!”), highlighting phrases in boldface or quotation marks, and inserting graphic faces (called emojis or “smileys”) representing the desired emotion. Studies suggest that writers are getting better at using these emotion symbols. Still, they do not replace the full complexity of real facial expressions, voice intonation, and hand movements.<sup>22</sup>

**Less Politeness and Respectfulness** Digital messages are often less diplomatic than written letters. Indeed, the term *flaming* has entered our language to describe messages that convey strong negative emotions. Receivers are partly to blame because they tend to infer a more negative interpretation of the digital message than was intended by the sender.<sup>23</sup> Even so, flame wars occur mostly because senders are more likely to send disparaging messages digitally than by other communication channels. One reason is that individuals can post digital messages before their emotions subside, whereas the sender of a traditional memo or letter would have time for sober second thoughts. A second reason why employees are more likely to send disrespectful messages digitally than in face-to-face conversation is that digital messages have low social presence (they are impersonal), which reduces the sender’s empathy and sensitivity. Fortunately, organizations are responding with explicit norms and rules that minimize flaming and cyberbullying.<sup>24</sup>

### **Cumbersome Medium for Ambiguous, Complex, and Novel Situations**

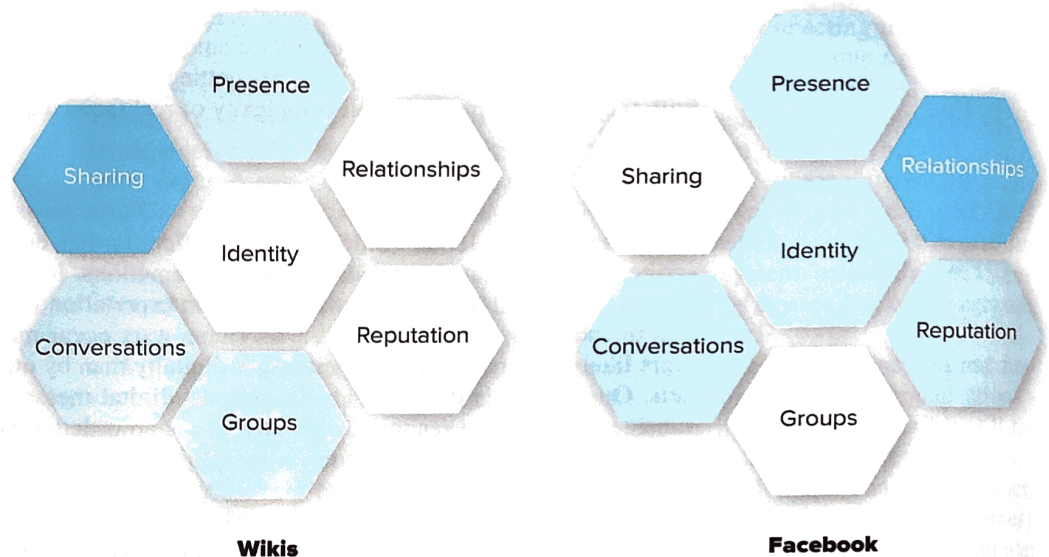
Digital messages are incredibly efficient for well-defined situations, such as confirming the location of a meeting or giving basic instructions for a routine activity. But this form of communication can be cumbersome and dysfunctional in ambiguous, complex, and novel situations. As we will describe later in this section, these circumstances require communication channels that transmit a larger volume of information with more rapid feedback. In other words, when the issue gets messy, stop emailing or texting and start talking, preferably face-to-face.

**Contributes to Information Overload** Digital messages contribute to information overload.<sup>25</sup> The phenomenal growth of email is one culprit. Approximately 72 trillion emails—more than half of which are in business settings—are now transmitted annually around the world, up from just 1.1 trillion in 1998. Almost two-thirds of all emails are spam!<sup>26</sup> The email glut occurs because messages are created and copied to many people without much effort. However, as the opening case study to this chapter noted, text messages from Slack and other emerging corporate communications platforms may become a greater source of information overload in future.

## **WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA**

Although email still dominates most workplace communication, it may eventually be overtaken by emerging forms of social media. Social media are Internet- or mobile-based channels that allow users to generate and interactively share information. They cover a wide range of categories: social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+), microblogs (Twitter), blogs and blog communities (Typepad, BlogHer), site comments and forums (FlyerTalk, Whirlpool), multimedia sharing (YouTube, Pinterest), publishing (Wikipedia), and several others.

Unlike traditional websites that merely “push” information from the creator to the audience, social media are more conversational and reciprocally interactive between sender and receiver, resulting in a sense of community.<sup>27</sup> Social media are “social” because they encourage formation of communities through links, interactive conversations,

**EXHIBIT 9.2 Functions of Communicating through Social Media**


Source: Based on J.H. Kietzmann, K. Hermkens, I.P. McCarthy, and B.S. Silvestre, "Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011): 241–51.

and (for some platforms) common space for collaborative content development. The audience can become participants in the conversation by contributing feedback and by linking someone else's content to their own social media spaces. Some social media platforms also enable users the right to develop a public identity.

Each type of social media serves a unique combination of functions, such as presenting the individual's identity, enabling conversations, sharing information, sensing the presence of others in the virtual space, maintaining relationships, revealing reputation or status, and supporting communities (see Exhibit 9.2).<sup>28</sup> For instance, Facebook has a strong emphasis on maintaining relationships but relatively low emphasis on sharing information or forming communities (groups). Wikis, on the other hand, focus on sharing information or forming communities but have a much lower emphasis on presenting the user's identity or reputation.

There is increasing evidence that enterprise social media platforms such as Yammer, IBM Connections, Facebook at Work, and Slack can improve knowledge sharing and socializing among employees under some conditions.<sup>29</sup> When a major credit card company introduced one of these enterprise social media platforms, its employees were 31 percent better at finding information and 71 percent better at finding the person with the original information. A large-scale study of Twitter tweets reported that this form of communication aided employees in transmitting knowledge, maintaining collegiality among coworkers, and strengthening their professional network. Many social media platforms enable feedback, which potentially gives employees more voice. One study found evidence of this voice, but only where these feedback mechanisms received management support.

Millennials are the strongest advocates of social media in the workplace, whereas one recent study reported that older employees remain skeptical. This may partly explain why most corporate leaders have been slow to adopt enterprise social media.<sup>30</sup> In fact, many companies simply ban employee access to any social media (usually after discovering excessive employee activity on Facebook) without thinking through the longer-term potential of these communication channels.



## global connections 9.1

### Bosch Employees Improve Collaboration through Social Media

A few years ago, Robert Bosch GmbH asked hundreds of its employees to describe their image of a future workplace that supports collaboration and idea generation. From this feedback, the German engineering and electronics company introduced Bosch Connect, an enterprise social media platform developed by IBM combined with Skype.

Bosch Connect includes several conditions to support collaboration. First, the online communities are self-organizing; employees set them up without seeking permission from management. Second, the communities are transparent, not hidden or restrictive. This means that any Bosch employee can join a community if it is public, or can ask to join if it is moderated. Third, employees are encouraged to ask questions and offer suggestions, even for communities outside their work specialization.

Bosch Connect has significantly boosted productivity and is now part of everyday work for most of the company's 300,000 employees. For example, one team completed a customer localization project in six days using Bosch Connect rather than email, compared to similar projects that took up to four weeks without Bosch



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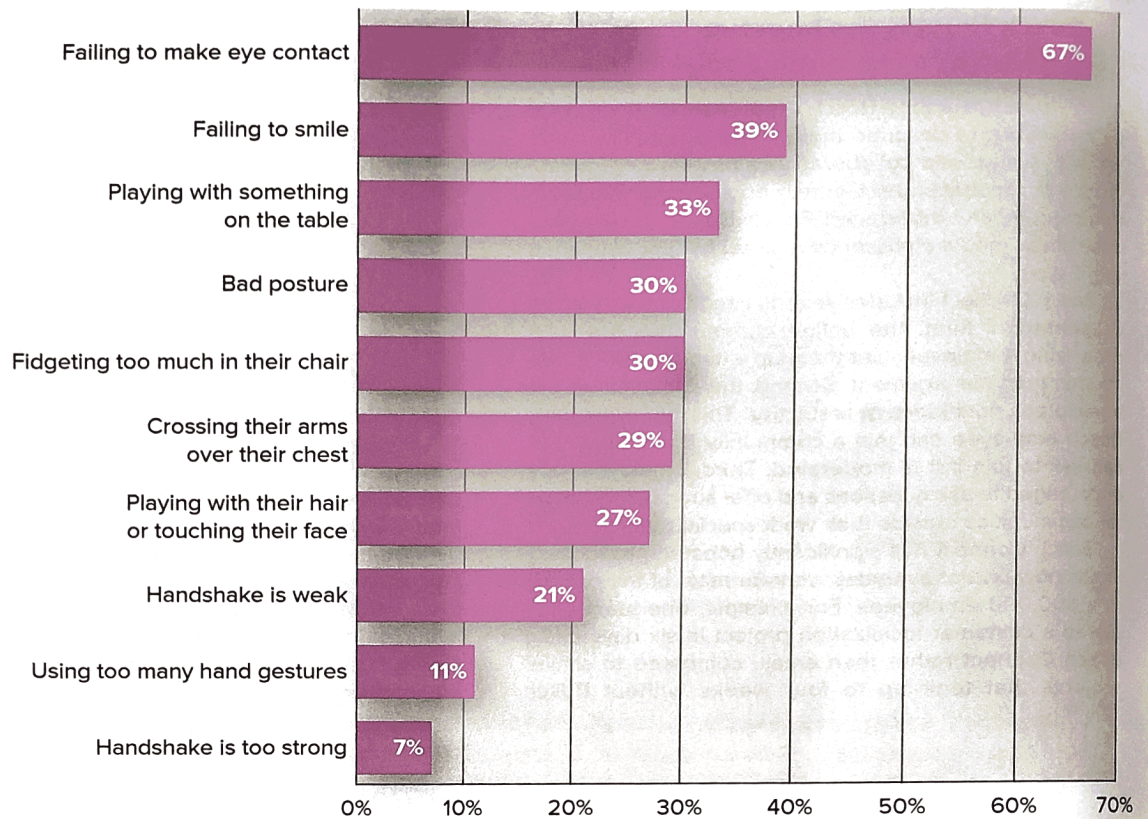
Connect (i.e., mainly used email). Bosch's social media platform is particularly popular among younger employees. "I'm used to chatting electronically with friends and family and using various social media channels to communicate in my private life," says Ee Von Lim, a Bosch accounting manager in Singapore. "Now when I'm collaborating with colleagues, communication is just as intuitive. That makes me more productive—and my work more fun."<sup>31</sup>

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

*Nonverbal communication* includes facial gestures, voice intonation, physical distance, and even silence.<sup>32</sup> This communication channel is necessary where noise or physical distance prevents effective verbal exchanges and the need for immediate feedback precludes written communication. But even in quiet face-to-face meetings, most information is communicated nonverbally. Rather like a parallel conversation, nonverbal cues signal subtle information to both parties, such as reinforcing their interest in the verbal conversation or demonstrating their relative status in the relationship.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, we often transmit messages nonverbally without being aware of this conversation. For example, Exhibit 9.3 identifies 10 behaviors among job applicants that transmit negative nonverbal messages about their character.

Nonverbal communication differs from verbal (i.e., written and spoken) communication in a couple of ways. First, it is less rule-bound than verbal communication. We receive considerable formal training on how to understand spoken words, but very little on how to understand the nonverbal signals that accompany those words. Consequently, nonverbal cues are generally more ambiguous and susceptible to misinterpretation. At the same time, many facial expressions (such as smiling) are hardwired and universal, thereby providing the only reliable means of communicating across cultures.

The other difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is that the former is typically conscious, whereas most nonverbal communication is automatic and nonconscious. We normally plan the words we say or write, but we rarely plan every blink, smile, or other gesture during a conversation. Indeed, as we just mentioned, many of these facial expressions communicate the same meaning across cultures because they are hardwired, nonconscious responses to human emotions.<sup>34</sup> For example, pleasant emotions cause the brain center to widen the mouth, whereas negative emotions produce constricted facial expressions (squinting eyes, pursed lips, etc.).

**EXHIBIT 9.3 Top 10 Body Language Mistakes in Job Interviews**

Note: Percentage of more than 2,500 U.S. human resource and hiring managers surveyed who identified each of these behaviors as the biggest body language mistakes made by job candidates during hiring interviews.<sup>35</sup>

**emotional contagion**  
the nonconscious process of “catching” or sharing another person’s emotions by mimicking that person’s facial expressions and other nonverbal behavior

**Emotional Contagion** One of the most fascinating aspects of nonverbal communication is **emotional contagion**, which is the automatic process of “catching” or sharing another person’s emotions by mimicking that person’s facial expressions and other nonverbal behavior. Technically, human beings have brain receptors that cause them to mirror what they observe. In other words, to some degree our brain causes us to act as though we are the person we are watching.<sup>36</sup>

Consider what happens when you see a coworker accidentally bang his or her head against a filing cabinet. Chances are, you wince and put your hand on your own head as if you had hit the cabinet. Similarly, while listening to someone describe a positive event, you tend to smile and exhibit other emotional displays of happiness. While some of our nonverbal communication is planned, emotional contagion represents nonconscious behavior—we automatically mimic and synchronize our nonverbal behaviors with other people.<sup>37</sup>

Emotional contagion influences communication and social relationships in three ways.<sup>38</sup> First, mimicry provides continuous feedback, communicating that we understand and empathize with the sender. To consider the significance of this, imagine employees remaining expressionless after watching a coworker bang his or her head! The lack of parallel behavior conveys a lack of understanding or caring. A second function is that mimicking the nonverbal behaviors of other people seems to be a way of receiving emotional meaning from those people. If a coworker is angry with a client, your tendency to frown and show anger while listening helps you experience that emotion more fully. In

other words, we receive meaning by expressing the sender's emotions as well as by listening to the sender's words.

The third function of emotional contagion is to fulfill the drive to bond that we mentioned earlier in this chapter and was introduced in Chapter 5. Bonding develops through each person's awareness of a collective sentiment. Through nonverbal expressions of emotional contagion, people see others share the same emotions that they feel. This strengthens relations among team members as well as between leaders and followers by providing evidence of their similarity.

## Choosing the Best Communication Channel

9-3

Employees have more communication channels to choose from than ever before, ranging from physical and technological forms of face-to-face interaction to a multitude of ways to transmit written messages. Which communication channel is most appropriate in a particular situation? There are many factors to consider, but the four most important are summarized in Exhibit 9.4 and described in this section.

### SYNCHRONICITY

Communication channels vary in their **synchronicity**, that is, the extent to which they require or allow both sender and receiver to be actively involved in the conversation at the same time.<sup>39</sup> Face-to-face conversations are almost always synchronous, whereas other forms of communication can occur with each party participating at different times (asynchronous). Emails are typically asynchronous because the receiver doesn't need to be around when email messages are sent. Online texting can be asynchronous, but it often occurs as a synchronous conversation. Synchronous communication is better when the information is required quickly (high immediacy) or where the issue is complex and therefore requires the parties to address several related decisions. Asynchronous communication is better when the issue is simple, the issue has low time urgency, getting both parties together at the same time is costly, and/or the receiver would benefit from time to reflect on the message before responding.

**synchronicity**  
the extent to which the channel requires or allows both sender and receiver to be actively involved in the conversation at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous)

### EXHIBIT 9.4 Factors in Choosing the Best Communication Channel

CHANNEL CHOICE FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	DEPENDS ON . . .
Synchronicity	The channel requires or allows the sender and receiver to communicate with each other at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time urgency (immediacy)</li> <li>• Complexity of the topic</li> <li>• Cost of both parties communicating at the same time</li> <li>• Whether receiver should have time to reflect before responding</li> </ul>
Social presence	The channel creates psychological closeness to others, awareness of their humanness, and appreciation of the interpersonal relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to empathize with others</li> <li>• Need to influence others</li> </ul>
Social acceptance	The channel is approved and supported by others (receiver, team, organization, or society)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational, team, and cultural norms</li> <li>• Each party's preferences and skills with the channel</li> <li>• Symbolic meaning of the channel</li> </ul>
Media richness	The channel has high data-carrying capacity—the volume and variety of information that can be transmitted during a specific time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situation is nonroutine</li> <li>• Situation is ambiguous</li> </ul>

**social presence**  
the extent to which a communication channel creates psychological closeness to others, awareness of their humanness, and appreciation of the interpersonal relationship

## SOCIAL PRESENCE

**Social presence** refers to how much the communication channel creates psychological closeness to others, awareness of their humanness, and appreciation of the interpersonal relationship.<sup>40</sup> Some communication channels make us more aware that there is another human being (or several others) in the conversation, and they produce a sense of mutual relationship. Face-to-face interactions almost always have the highest social presence, whereas low social presence would typically occur when sending an email to a large distribution list. Social presence is also stronger in synchronous communication because immediate responses by the other party to our messages increase the sense of connectedness with that person. Although social presence is mostly affected by specific channel characteristics, message content also plays a role. For example, social presence is affected by how casually or formally the message is conveyed and by how much personal information about the sender is included in the message.

A communication channel is valued for its social presence effect when the purpose of the dialogue is to understand and empathize with the other person or group. People are also more willing to listen and help others when there is a degree of interpersonal relationship or feeling of human connectedness. Therefore, channels with high social presence are better when the sender wants to influence the receiver.

## SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Social acceptance refers to how well the communication medium is approved and supported by the organization, teams, and individuals involved in the exchange.<sup>41</sup> One social acceptance factor is the set of norms held by the organizational, team, and culture. Norms explain why face-to-face meetings are daily events among staff in some firms, whereas computer-based videoconferencing (such as Skype) and Twitter tweets are the media of choice in other organizations. Studies report that national culture plays an important role in preferences for specific communication channels.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Koreans are much less likely than Americans to email corporate executives because in Korea email is considered insufficiently respectful of the superior's status. Other research has found that the preference for email depends on the culture's emphasis on context, time, and space in social relationships.

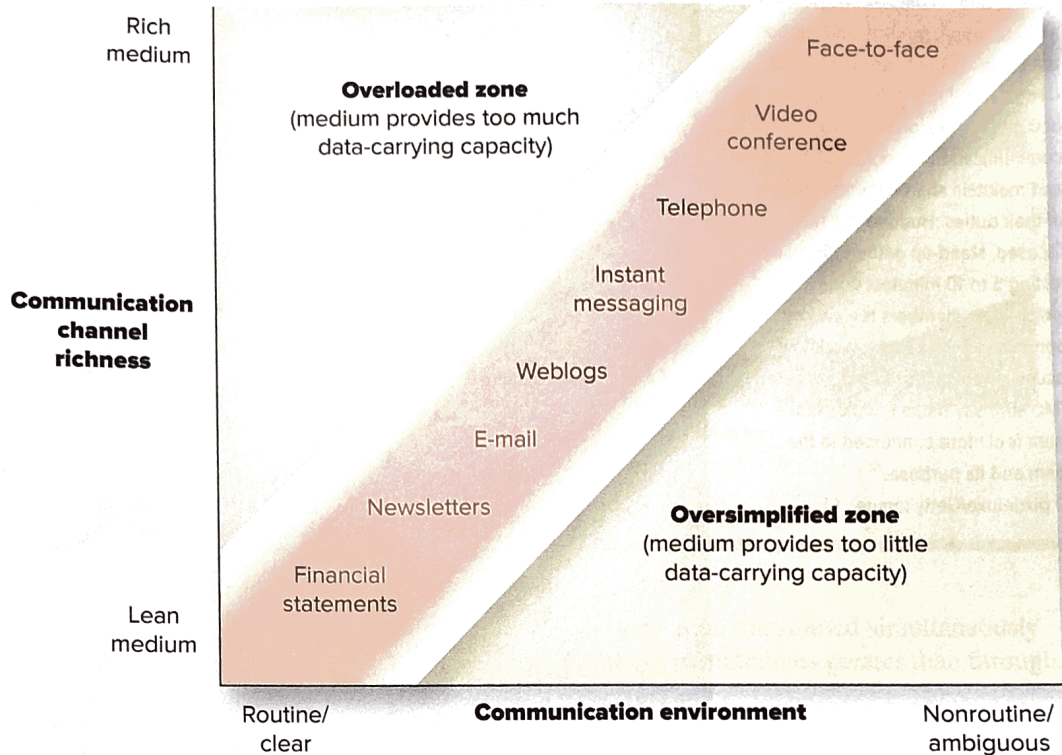
A second social acceptance factor is the sender's and receiver's preferences for specific communication channels.<sup>43</sup> You may have noticed that some coworkers ignore (or rarely check) voice mail, yet they quickly respond to text messages or Twitter tweets. These preferences are due to personality traits as well as previous experience and reinforcement with particular channels.

A third social acceptance factor is the symbolic meaning of a channel.<sup>44</sup> Some communication channels are viewed as impersonal whereas others are more personal; some are considered professional whereas others are casual; some are "cool" whereas others are old-fashioned. For instance, phone calls and other synchronous communication channels convey a greater sense of urgency than do text messages and other asynchronous channels. The importance of a channel's symbolic meaning is perhaps most apparent in stories about managers who use emails or text messages to inform employees that they are fired or laid off. These communication events make headlines because email and text messages are considered inappropriate (too impersonal) for transmission of that particular information.<sup>45</sup>

## MEDIA RICHNESS

In the opening case study for this chapter, Spring cofounder Octavian Costache commented that Slack and similar digital communication technologies don't work as well as face-to-face meetings for the intense, creative discussions he has with the company's engineering team. He specifically referred to the volume and richness of

## EXHIBIT 9.5 Media Richness Hierarchy



Sources: Based on R.H. Lengel and R.L. Daft, "The Selection of Communication Media as an Executive Skill," *Academy of Management Executive* 2, no. 3 (August 1988): 226; R.L. Daft and R.H. Lengel, "Information Richness: A New Approach to Managerial Behavior and Organization Design," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6 (1984): 199.

information exchange in these meetings that can't be handled as effectively through online text messages. Costache was describing the idea that communication channels vary in their level of media richness. **Media richness** refers to the medium's data-carrying capacity—the volume and variety of information that can be transmitted during a specific time.<sup>46</sup>

Exhibit 9.5 illustrates various communication channels arranged in a hierarchy of richness, with face-to-face interaction at the top and lean data-only reports at the bottom. A communication channel has high richness when it is able to convey multiple cues (such as both verbal and nonverbal information), allows timely feedback from receiver to sender, allows the sender to customize the message to the receiver, and makes use of complex symbols (such as words and phrases with multiple meanings).

Face-to-face communication has very high media richness because it allows us to communicate both verbally and nonverbally at the same time, to get feedback almost immediately from the receiver, to quickly adjust our message and style, and to use complex language such as metaphors and idioms (e.g., "spilling the beans"). For example, hospitals in many countries are encouraging employees to have brief daily huddles during which team members share information and expectations about the day's work.<sup>47</sup> Rich media tend to be synchronous and have high social presence, but not always.

According to media richness theory, rich media are better than lean media when the communication situation is nonroutine and ambiguous. In nonroutine situations (such as an unexpected and unusual emergency), the sender and receiver have little common experience, so they need to transmit a large volume of information with immediate feedback. Lean media work well in routine situations because the sender and receiver have common expectations through shared mental models. Ambiguous situations also require

**media richness**

a medium's data-carrying capacity—that is, the volume and variety of information that can be transmitted during a specific time

Patient care is complex and potentially ambiguous, so medical and support teams throughout Tucson Medical Center (TMC) rely on daily huddles and other forms of media-rich communication to coordinate work and maintain shared mental models of their duties. Huddles are task-focused, stand-up gatherings, usually lasting 5 to 10 minutes, during which team members review key performance measures, workflow issues, and changes in patient care. TMC staff say these huddles make them feel more connected to the team and its purpose.<sup>48</sup>

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rich media because the parties must share large amounts of information with immediate feedback to resolve multiple and conflicting interpretations of their observations and experiences.<sup>49</sup>

Choosing the wrong medium reduces communication effectiveness. When the situation is routine or clear, using a rich medium—such as holding a special meeting—would be a waste of time.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, if a unique and ambiguous issue is handled through email or another lean medium, then issues take longer to resolve and misunderstandings are more likely to occur.

**Exceptions to the Media Richness Theory** Research generally supports media richness theory for traditional channels (face-to-face, written memos, etc.). However, the model doesn't fit reality nearly as well when digital communication channels are studied.<sup>51</sup> Three factors seem to explain why digital channels may have more media richness than media richness theory predicts:

1. *Ability to multicomunicate.* It is usually difficult (as well as rude) to communicate face-to-face with someone while simultaneously transmitting messages to another person using another medium. Most digital communication channels, on the other hand, require less social etiquette and attention, so employees can easily engage in two or more communication events at the same time. In other words, they can multicomunicate.<sup>52</sup> For example, people routinely scan web pages while talking to someone on the phone or video chat (e.g., Skype). Employees tap out text messages to a client while simultaneously listening to a discussion at a large meeting. Research consistently finds that people multitask less efficiently



## global connections 9.2

### Multicommunicating across the Pacific

Not long ago, Doug Stuart was skeptical that communication technology would be anywhere as good as a meeting with everyone in the same room. “If you had asked me that four years ago I would have rolled my eyes and said it is never going to work,” says the chief information officer at IBM New Zealand.

Today, technology quality, together with the ability to multicommunicate during meetings, has dramatically improved the communication experience of virtual meetings. “I’m looking at my screen and seeing their presentations and hearing their voices,” Stuart said while he remotely attended a meeting of IBM colleagues in the United States from his workplace in Wellington. “You have the ability to raise your hand, send real-time text messaging to the chair of the meeting . . . and blogs are active during these sessions as well.”<sup>53</sup>



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than they assume,<sup>54</sup> but the volume of information transmitted simultaneously through two digital communication channels is sometimes greater than through one high media richness channel.

2. *Communication proficiency.* Earlier in this chapter we explained that communication effectiveness is partially determined by the sender’s ability and motivation with the communication channel. People with higher proficiency can “push” more information through the channel, thereby increasing the channel’s information flow. Experienced smartphone users, for instance, can whip through messages in a flash, whereas new users struggle to type notes and organize incoming messages. In contrast, there is less variation in the ability to communicate through casual conversation and other natural channels because most of us develop good levels of proficiency throughout life and possibly through hardwired evolutionary development.<sup>55</sup>
3. *Social presence effects.* Channels with high media richness tend to have more social presence.<sup>56</sup> However, high social presence also sensitizes both parties to their relative status and self-presentation, which can distort or divert attention away from the message.<sup>57</sup> Face-to-face communication has very high media richness, yet its high social presence can disrupt the efficient flow of information through that medium. During a personal meeting with the company’s CEO, for example, you might concentrate more on your image to the CEO than on what the CEO is saying to you. In other words, the benefits of channels with high media richness may be offset by more social presence distractions, whereas lean media have much less social presence to distract or distort the transmitted information.

### COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND PERSUASION

Some communication channels are more effective than others for **persuasion**, that is, changing another person’s beliefs and attitudes. Studies support the long-held view that spoken communication, particularly face-to-face interaction, is more persuasive than emails, websites, and other forms of written communication. There are three main reasons for this persuasive effect.<sup>58</sup> First, spoken communication is typically accompanied by nonverbal communication. People are persuaded more when they receive both emotional and logical messages, and the combination of spoken with nonverbal communication

#### persuasion

the use of facts, logical arguments, and emotional appeals to change another person’s beliefs and attitudes, usually for the purpose of changing the person’s behavior

provides this dual punch. A lengthy pause, raised voice tone, and (in face-to-face interaction) animated hand gestures can amplify the emotional tone of the message, thereby signaling the vitality of the issue.

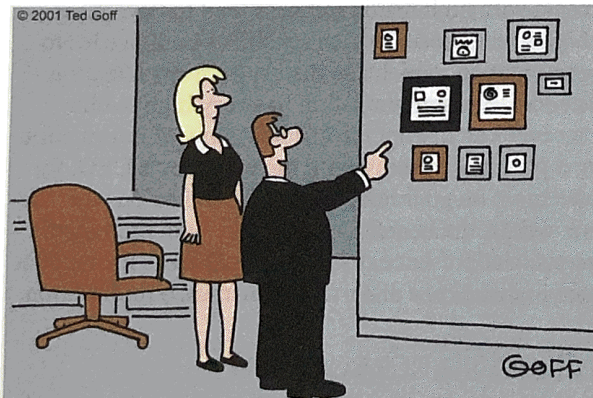
A second reason why conversations are more persuasive is that spoken communication offers the sender high-quality, immediate feedback about whether the receiver understands and accepts the message (i.e., is being persuaded). This feedback allows the sender to adjust the content and emotional tone of the message more quickly than with written communication. A third reason is that people are persuaded more under conditions of high social presence than low social presence. Listeners have higher motivation to pay attention and consider the sender's ideas in face-to-face conversations (high social presence). In contrast, persuasive communication through a website, email, and other low social presence channels are less effective due to the higher degree of anonymity and psychological distance from the persuader.

Although spoken communication tends to be more persuasive, written communication can also persuade others to some extent. Written messages have the advantage of presenting more technical detail than can occur through conversation. This factual information is valuable when the issue is important to the receiver. Also, people experience a moderate degree of social presence in written communication with friends and coworkers, so written messages can be persuasive when sent and received with close associates.

## Communication Barriers (Noise)



In spite of the best intentions of sender and receiver to communicate, several barriers (called “noise” earlier in Exhibit 9.1) inhibit the effective exchange of information. As author George Bernard Shaw once wrote, “The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.” One barrier is that both sender and receiver have imperfect perceptual processes. As receivers, we don't listen as well as senders assume, and our needs and expectations influence what signals get noticed and ignored. We aren't any better as senders, either. Some studies suggest that we have difficulty stepping out of our own perspectives and stepping into the perspectives of others, so we overestimate how well other people understand the message we are communicating.<sup>59</sup>



**“That's my commendation for deciphering all the sales talk when we needed to upgrade the computer.”**

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Language issues can be huge sources of communication noise because sender and receiver might not have the same codebook. They might not speak the same language, or might have different meanings for particular words and phrases. The English language (among others) also has built-in ambiguities that cause misunderstandings. Consider the phrase “Can you close the door?” You might assume the sender is asking whether shutting the door is permitted. However, the question might be asking whether you are physically able to shut the door or whether the door is designed such that it can be shut. In fact, this question might not be a question at all; the person could be politely *telling* you to shut the door.<sup>60</sup>

The ambiguity of language isn't always dysfunctional noise.<sup>61</sup> Corporate leaders sometimes purposely use obscure language to reflect the ambiguity of the topic or to avoid unwanted emotional responses produced by more specific words. They might use metaphors to represent an abstract vision of the company's future, or use obtuse phrases such as “rightsizing” and “restructuring” to obscure the underlying message that people will be fired or laid off. Studies report that effective

communicators also use more abstract words and symbols when addressing diverse or distant (not well known to the speaker) audiences, because abstraction increases the likelihood that the message is understood across a broader range of listeners.

*Jargon*—specialized words and phrases for specific occupations or groups—is usually designed to improve communication efficiency. However, it is a source of communication noise when transmitted to people who do not possess the jargon codebook. Furthermore, people who use jargon excessively put themselves in an unflattering light. For example, Twitter cofounder and CEO Jack Dorsey recently fell into the jargon trap when attempting to gently tell hundreds of Twitter employees that they would be laid off. His email to all staff began: “We are moving forward with a restructuring of our workforce.” After stating that “we plan to part ways with up to 336 people,” he closed with: “We do so with a more purpose-built team, which we’ll continue to build strength into over time, as we are now enabled to reinvest in our most impactful priorities.” Dorsey’s attempt to soften the blow with corporate speak didn’t have the desired effect, even if employees did figure out what he meant.<sup>62</sup>

Another source of noise in the communication process is the tendency to filter messages. Filtering may involve deleting or delaying negative information or using less harsh words so the message sounds more favorable.<sup>63</sup> Filtering is less likely to occur when corporate leaders create a “culture of candor.” This culture develops when leaders themselves communicate truthfully, seek out diverse sources for information, and protect and reward those who speak openly and truthfully.<sup>64</sup>

## INFORMATION OVERLOAD

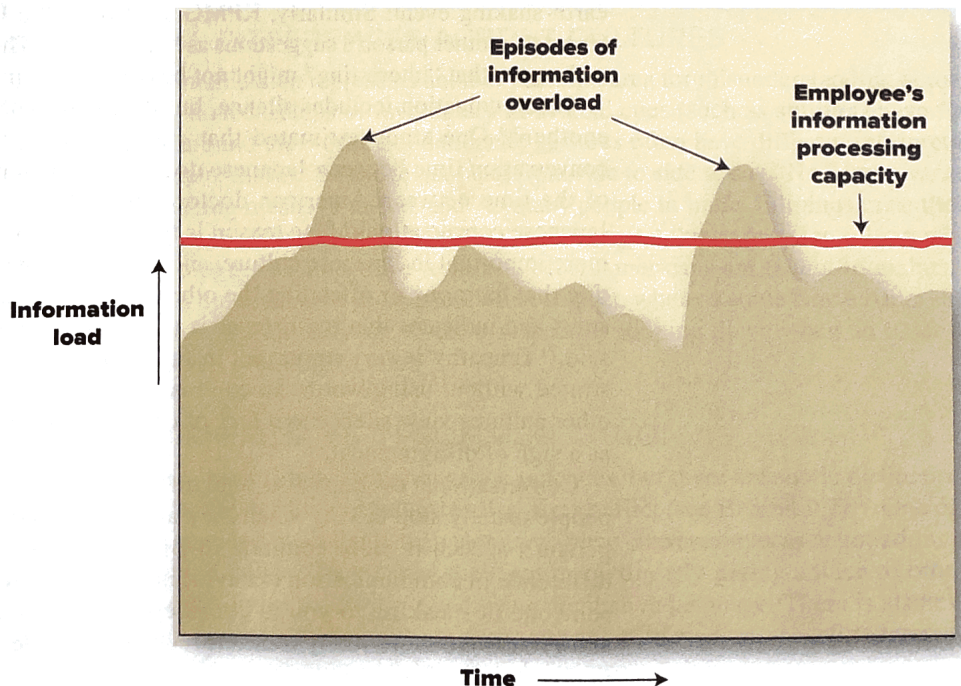
Start with a daily avalanche of email, then add in cell phone calls, text messages, PDF file downloads, web pages, hard copy documents, some Twitter tweets, blogs, wikis, and other sources of incoming information. Altogether, you have created a perfect recipe for **information overload**.<sup>65</sup> As Exhibit 9.6 illustrates, information overload occurs whenever the job’s information load exceeds the individual’s capacity to get through it. Employees have a certain *information-processing capacity*—the amount of information that they are able to process in a fixed unit of time. At the same time, jobs have a varying

### information overload

a condition in which the volume of information received exceeds the person’s capacity to process it

## EXHIBIT 9.6

### Dynamics of Information Overload



*information load*—the amount of information to be processed per unit of time. Information overload creates noise in the communication system because information gets overlooked or misinterpreted when people can't process it fast enough. The result is poorer-quality decisions as well as higher stress.<sup>66</sup>

Information overload problems can be minimized by increasing our information-processing capacity, reducing the job's information load, or through a combination of both. Studies suggest that employees often increase their information-processing capacity by temporarily reading faster, scanning through documents more efficiently, and removing distractions that slow information-processing speed. Time management also increases information-processing capacity. When information overload is temporary, employees can increase their information-processing capacity by working longer hours. Information load can be reduced by buffering, omitting, and summarizing. Buffering involves having incoming communication filtered, usually by an assistant. Omitting occurs when we decide to overlook messages, such as using software rules to redirect emails from distribution lists to folders that we rarely look at. Summarizing involves digesting a condensed version of the complete communication, such as reading an executive summary rather than the full report.

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## Cross-Cultural and Gender Communication

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Increasing globalization and cultural diversity have created more cross-cultural communication issues.<sup>67</sup> Voice intonation is one form of cross-cultural communication barrier. How loudly, deeply, and quickly people speak varies across cultures, and these voice intonations send secondary messages that have different meanings in different societies.

Language is an obvious cross-cultural communication challenge. Words are easily misunderstood in verbal communication, either because the receiver has a limited vocabulary or the sender's accent distorts the usual sound of some words. In one cross-cultural seminar, for example, participants at German electronics company Siemens were reminded that a French coworker might call an event a "catastrophe" as a casual exaggeration, whereas someone in Germany usually interprets this word literally as an earth-shaking event. Similarly, KPMG staff from the United Kingdom sometimes referred to another person's suggestions as "interesting." They had to clarify to their German colleagues that "interesting" might not be complimenting the idea.<sup>68</sup>

Communication includes silence, but its use and meaning vary from one culture to another.<sup>69</sup> One study estimated that silence and pauses represented 30 percent of conversation time between Japanese doctors and patients, compared to only 8 percent of the time between American doctors and patients. Why is there more silence in Japanese conversations? One reason is that interpersonal harmony and saving face are more important in Japanese culture, and silence is a way of disagreeing without upsetting that harmony or offending the other person.<sup>70</sup> In addition, silence symbolizes respect and indicates that the listener is thoughtfully contemplating what has just been said.<sup>71</sup> Empathy is very important in Japan, and this shared understanding is demonstrated without using words. In contrast, most people in the United States and many other cultures view silence as a *lack* of communication and often interpret long breaks as a sign of disagreement.

Conversational overlaps also send different messages in different cultures. Japanese people usually stop talking when they are interrupted, whereas talking over the other person's speech is more common in Brazil, France, and some other countries. The difference in communication behavior is, again, due to interpretations. Talking while someone is speaking to you is considered quite rude in Japan, whereas Brazilians and French are more likely to interpret this as the person's interest and involvement in the conversation.



## global connections 9.3

### Politely Waiting for Some Silence

Miho Aizu has attended many meetings where participants communicated in English. Until recently, the manager at Accenture in Japan thought she communicated well in those sessions. But in a recent training program conducted by the professional services firm, Aizu learned that Japanese cultural norms held back her involvement in cross-cultural business conversations. One such problem was that she tends to be too polite in waiting for others to finish talking. "I was told I needed to jump into discussions rather than wait until everyone had said what they wanted to say," says Aizu. Managers from North America, South America, the Middle East, and most of Europe seldom allow silence to occur, so Aizu and other Japanese participants are often left out of the conversation.

Aizu also realized that her involvement is held back by the Japanese tendency to be overly self-conscious about imperfect language skills. "During the team discussions, there were many things I wanted to say, but I felt I had to brush up my English language and presentation skills," Aizu admits. In contrast, Accenture managers from many other non-English countries speak up in spite of their broken English.

In Japan, speaking well and waiting for others to finish are signs of respect and cultural refinement. But in meetings with managers across most other cultures, this lack of communication sends a different message. "There are many people who come to me and say they don't know what Japanese people are thinking," says Accenture Japan president Chikamoto Hodo. "Our people [at Accenture] are



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more talkative than most Japanese, but they still have a difficult time communicating with foreigners."

Accenture wants to develop leaders who can communicate effectively across its global operations, so it has developed special programs that coach its managers to engage in better conversations with colleagues and clients across cultures. While Accenture participants learn about Japanese communication practices, Aizu and other Accenture staff in Japan are coached to become more active communicators. "After various training programs, I am more able to say what I need to say, without worrying too much about the exact words," says Satoshi Tanaka, senior manager of human resources at Accenture Japan.<sup>72</sup>

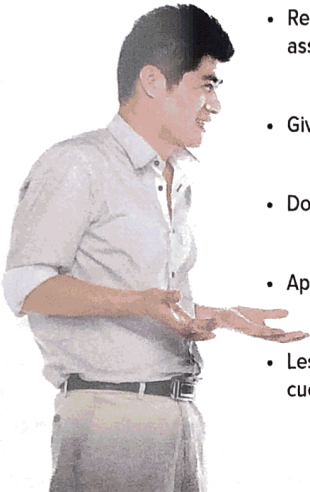

## NONVERBAL DIFFERENCES ACROSS CULTURES

Nonverbal communication represents another potential area for misunderstanding across cultures. Many nonconscious or involuntary nonverbal cues (such as smiling) have the same meaning around the world, but deliberate gestures often have different interpretations. For example, most of us shake our head from side to side to say "No," but a variation of head shaking means "I understand" to many people in India. Filipinos raise their eyebrows to give an affirmative answer, yet Arabs interpret this expression (along with clicking one's tongue) as a negative response. Most Americans are taught to maintain eye contact with the speaker to show interest and respect, whereas some North American native groups learn at an early age to show respect by looking down when an older or more senior person is talking to them.<sup>73</sup>

## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

Men and women have similar communication practices, but there are subtle distinctions that can occasionally lead to misunderstanding and conflict (see Exhibit 9.7).<sup>74</sup> One distinction is that men are more likely than women to view conversations as negotiations of relative status and power. They assert their power by directly giving advice to others (e.g., "You should do the following") and using combative language. There is also evidence that men dominate the talk time in conversations with women, as well as interrupt more and adjust their speaking style less than do women.

**EXHIBIT 9.7 Gender Differences in Communication**

WHEN MEN COMMUNICATE	WHEN WOMEN COMMUNICATE
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report talk—give advice, assert power</li> <li>• Give advice directly</li> <li>• Dominant conversation style</li> <li>• Apologize less often</li> <li>• Less sensitive to nonverbal cues</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapport talk—relationship building</li> <li>• Give advice indirectly</li> <li>• Flexible conversation style</li> <li>• Apologize more often</li> <li>• More sensitive to nonverbal cues</li> </ul>

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Men engage in more “report talk,” in which the primary function of the conversation is impersonal and efficient information exchange. Women also do report talk, particularly when conversing with men, but conversations among women have a higher incidence of relationship building through “rapport talk.”<sup>75</sup> Women use more tentative speech patterns, including modifiers (“It might be a good idea . . .”), disclaimers (“I’m not certain, but . . .”), and tag questions (“This works, doesn’t it?”). They also make more use of indirect requests (“Do you think you should . . .”), apologize more often, and seek advice from others more quickly than do men. These gender differences are modest, however, mainly because men also use these speech patterns to some extent. Research does clearly indicate that women are more sensitive than men to nonverbal cues in face-to-face meetings. Together, these conditions can create communication conflicts. Women who describe problems get frustrated that men offer advice rather than rapport, whereas men become frustrated because they can’t understand why women don’t appreciate their advice.

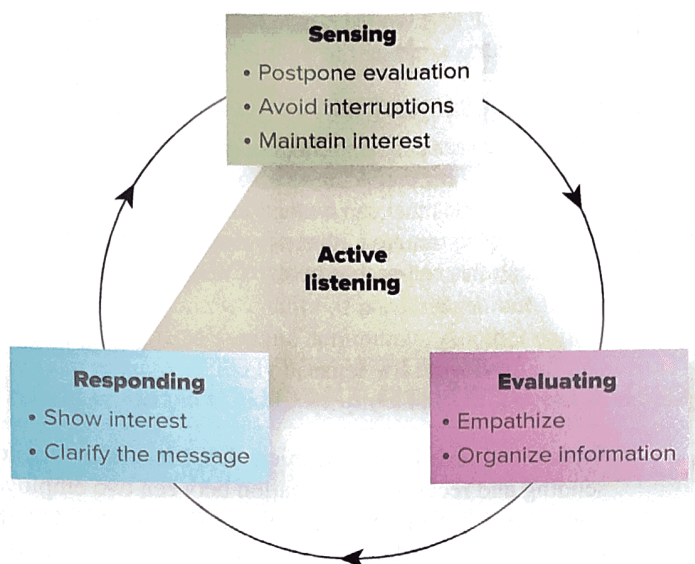
## Improving Interpersonal Communication

9-5

Effective interpersonal communication depends on the sender’s ability to get the message across and the receiver’s performance as an active listener. In this section, we outline these two essential features of effective interpersonal communication.

### GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

This chapter began with the statement that effective communication occurs when the other person receives and understands the message. This is more difficult to accomplish than most people believe. To get your message across to the other person, you first need to empathize with the receiver, such as being sensitive to words that may be ambiguous or trigger the wrong emotional response. Second, be sure that you repeat the message, such as by rephrasing the key points a couple of times. Third, your message competes with other messages and noise, so find a time when the receiver is less likely to be distracted by these other matters. Finally, if you are communicating bad news or criticism, focus on the problem, not the person.

**EXHIBIT 9.8****Active Listening Process and Strategies****ACTIVE LISTENING**

General Electric Company (GE) recently revised its famous leadership development program to become more aligned with the cultural diversity of its employees and emerging leaders. One discovery in past programs was that U.S. managers were good at talking, but didn't always give the same priority to active listening. GE "now majors people on listening," says Susan Peters, GE's chief learning officer. "It's something we have to really work on, to equal the playing field between our American leaders and our non-American leaders."<sup>76</sup>

GE and other companies are increasingly recognizing that effective leadership includes active listening. Active listening is a process of mindfully sensing the sender's signals, evaluating them accurately, and responding appropriately. These three components of listening—sensing, evaluating, and responding—reflect the listener's side of the communication model described at the beginning of this chapter. Listeners receive the sender's signals, decode them as intended, and provide appropriate and timely feedback to the sender (see Exhibit 9.8). Active listeners constantly cycle through sensing, evaluating, and responding during the conversation and engage in various activities to improve these processes.<sup>77</sup>

- *Sensing.* Sensing is the process of receiving signals from the sender and paying attention to them. Active listeners improve sensing in three ways. First, they postpone evaluation by not forming an opinion until the speaker has finished. Second, they avoid interrupting the speaker's conversation. Third, they remain motivated to listen to the speaker.
- *Evaluating.* This component of listening includes understanding the message meaning, evaluating the message, and remembering the message. To improve their evaluation of the conversation, active listeners empathize with the speaker—they try to understand and be sensitive to the speaker's feelings, thoughts, and situation. Evaluation also improves by organizing the speaker's ideas during the communication episode.
- *Responding.* This third component of listening involves providing feedback to the sender, which motivates and directs the speaker's communication. Active listeners accomplish this by maintaining sufficient eye contact and sending back channel signals (e.g., "I see"), both of which show interest. They also respond by clarifying the message—rephrasing the speaker's ideas at appropriate breaks ("So you're saying that . . . ?").


**connect**
**SELF-ASSESSMENT 9.1: Are You an Active Listener?**

Listening is a critical component of communication. But most people put more effort into how well they communicate as a sender than how well they listen as a receiver. Active listening is a skill that can be learned, so the first step is to know which components of active listening require further development. You can discover your level of active listening by locating this self-assessment in Connect if it is assigned by your instructor.

## Improving Communication throughout the Hierarchy


 9-6

So far, we have looked at micro-level issues in the communication process, namely, sending and receiving information between two employees or the informal exchanges of information across several people. But in this era where knowledge is competitive advantage, corporate leaders also need to maintain an open flow of communication up, down, and across the entire organization. In this section, we discuss three organization-wide communication strategies: workspace design, Internet-based communication, and direct communication with top management.

### WORKSPACE DESIGN

To improve information sharing and create a more sociable work environment, Intel has torn down the cubicle walls at its microchip design center near Portland, Oregon. “We realized that we were inefficient and not as collaborative as we would have liked,” acknowledges Neil Tunmore, Intel’s director of corporate services. The refurbished building includes more shared space where employees set up temporary work areas. There are also more meeting rooms where employees can collaborate in private.<sup>78</sup>

Intel and many other companies are improving communication by redesigning the workspace and employee territorial practices in that space.<sup>79</sup> The location and design of hallways, offices, cubicles, and communal areas (cafeterias, elevators) all shape to whom we speak as well as the frequency of that communication. Although these open-space arrangements increase the amount of face-to-face communication, they also potentially produce more noise, distractions, and loss of privacy.<sup>80</sup> “There were a lot of distractions, and it was hard to stay focused,” complained one GlaxoSmithKline employee soon after moving to the company’s open-space work center in Raleigh, North Carolina.<sup>81</sup> Others claim that open workspaces have minimal noise problems because employees tend to speak more softly and white noise technology blocks out most voices. Still, the challenge is to increase social interaction without raising noise and distraction levels.

Another workspace strategy is to cloister employees into team spaces, but also encourage sufficient interaction with people from other teams. Pixar Animation Studios constructed its campus in Emeryville, California, with these principles in mind. The building encourages communication among team members. At the same time, the campus encourages happenstance interactions with people on other teams. Pixar executives call this the “bathroom effect” because team members must leave their isolated pods to fetch their mail, have lunch, or visit the restroom.<sup>82</sup>

### INTERNET-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

For decades, employees received official company news through hard copy newsletters and magazines. Some firms still use these communication devices, but most have supplemented or replaced them completely with web-based sources of information. The

traditional company magazine is now typically published on web pages or distributed in PDF format. The advantage of these *e-zines* is that company news can be prepared and distributed quickly.

Employees are increasingly skeptical of information that has been screened and packaged by management, so a few companies such as IBM are encouraging employees to post their own news on internal blogs and wikis. Wikis are collaborative web spaces in which anyone in a group can write, edit, or remove material from the website. *Wikipedia*, the popular online encyclopedia, is a massive public example of a wiki. IBM's WikiCentral now hosts more than 20,000 wiki projects involving 100,000 employees. The accuracy of wikis depends on the quality of participants, but IBM experts say that errors are quickly identified by IBM's online community. Another concern is that wikis have failed to gain employee support, likely because wiki involvement takes time and the company does not reward or recognize those who provide this time to wiki development.<sup>83</sup>

## DIRECT COMMUNICATION WITH TOP MANAGEMENT

According to various surveys, effective organizational communication includes regular interaction directly between senior executives and employees further down the hierarchy. One form of direct communication is through town hall meetings, where executives brief a large gathering of staff on the company's current strategy and results. Although the communication is mostly from executives to employees, town hall meetings are more personal and credible than video or written channels. Also, these events usually provide some opportunity for employees to ask questions. Another strategy is for senior executives to hold roundtable forums with a small representation of employees, mainly to hear their opinions on various issues.

A less formal approach to direct communication is **management by walking around (MBWA)**. Coined by people at Hewlett-Packard four decades ago, this is essentially the practice in which senior executives get out of their offices and casually chat with employees on a daily or regular basis.<sup>84</sup> Some executives, such as Jet.com cofounder and CEO Marc Lore, don't even have an office or a desk; they move around to different workspaces, which makes MBWA a natural part of their daily activity. These direct communication strategies potentially minimize filtering because executives listen directly to employees. They also help executives acquire a deeper meaning and quicker understanding of internal

### management by walking around (MBWA)

a communication practice in which executives get out of their offices and learn from others in the organization through face-to-face dialogue

Marc Lore (on the right in this photo) doesn't have an office. The cofounder of start-up discount shopping site Jet.com doesn't even have his own desk. Instead, Lore does what most of Jet's 300 employees do every day; he takes his computer and other gear from a personal locker and finds a comfy area to work in the company's new headquarters in Hoboken, New Jersey. As CEO, Lore often does management by wandering around, chatting with many employees throughout the day about their work and ideas. He also holds monthly town hall meetings with all staff to update them on the company's strategy, vision, and financials. "I engage with as many people as possible," says Lore. "I think it helps connect what they are working on to the bigger picture and strategy."<sup>85</sup>

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organizational problems. A third benefit of direct communication is that employees might have more empathy for decisions made further up the corporate hierarchy.

## Communicating through the Grapevine

### grapevine

an unstructured and informal communication network founded on social relationships rather than organizational charts or job descriptions

Organizational leaders may try their best to quickly communicate breaking news to employees through emails, Twitter tweets, and other direct formal channels, but employees still rely to some extent on the corporate **grapevine**. The grapevine is an unstructured and informal network founded on social relationships rather than organizational charts or job descriptions. What do employees think about the grapevine? Surveys of employees in two firms—one in Florida, the other in California—found that almost all employees use the grapevine, but very few of them prefer this source of information. The California survey also reported that only one-third of employees believe grapevine information is credible. In other words, employees turn to the grapevine when they have few other options.<sup>86</sup>

### GRAPEVINE CHARACTERISTICS

Research conducted several decades ago reported that the grapevine transmits information very rapidly in all directions throughout the organization. The typical pattern is a cluster chain, whereby a few people actively transmit information to many others. The grapevine works through informal social networks, so it is more active where employees have similar backgrounds and are able to communicate easily. Many rumors seem to have at least a kernel of truth, possibly because they are transmitted through media-rich communication channels (e.g., face-to-face) and employees are motivated to communicate effectively. Nevertheless, the grapevine distorts information by deleting fine details and exaggerating key points of the story.<sup>87</sup>

Some of these characteristics might still be true, but the grapevine almost certainly has changed as email, social networking sites, and Twitter tweets have replaced the traditional water cooler as sources of gossip. For example, several Facebook sites are unofficially themed around specific companies, allowing employees and customers to vent their complaints about the organization. Along with altering the speed and network of corporate grapevines, the Internet has expanded these networks around the globe, not just around the next cubicle.

### GRAPEVINE BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

Should the grapevine be encouraged, tolerated, or quashed? The difficulty in answering this question is that the grapevine has both benefits and limitations.<sup>88</sup> One benefit, as was mentioned earlier, is that employees rely on the grapevine when information is not available through formal channels. It is also the main conduit through which organizational stories and other symbols of the organization's culture are communicated. A third benefit of the grapevine is that this social interaction relieves anxiety. This explains why rumor mills are most active during times of uncertainty.<sup>89</sup> Finally, the grapevine is associated with the drive to bond. Being a recipient of gossip is a sign of inclusion, according to evolutionary psychologists. Trying to quash the grapevine is, in some respects, an attempt to undermine the natural human drive for social interaction.<sup>90</sup>

While the grapevine offers these benefits, it is not a preferred communication medium. Grapevine information is sometimes so distorted that it escalates rather than reduces employee anxiety. Furthermore, employees develop more negative attitudes toward the organization when management is slower than the grapevine in communicating information. What should corporate leaders do with the grapevine? The best advice seems to be to listen to the grapevine as a signal of employee anxiety, then correct the cause of this anxiety. Some companies also listen to the grapevine and step in to correct blatant errors and fabrications. Most important, corporate leaders need to view the grapevine as a competitor and meet this challenge by directly informing employees of news before it spreads throughout the grapevine.



## debating point

### SHOULD MANAGEMENT USE THE GRAPEVINE TO COMMUNICATE TO EMPLOYEES?

The grapevine has been the curse of management since modern-day organizations were invented. News flows with stealthlike efficiency below the surface, making it difficult to tell where information is traveling, what is being said to whom, or who is responsible for any misinformation. Although employees naturally flock to the grapevine for knowledge and social comfort in difficult times, its messages can be so distorted that it sometimes produces more stress than it alleviates. It is absurd to imagine management trying to systematically transmit important information—or any news whatsoever—through this uncontrollable, quirky communication channel.

But some communication experts are taking a second look at the grapevine, viewing it more as a resource than a nemesis. Their inspiration comes from marketing, where viral and word-of-mouth marketing have become hot topics.<sup>91</sup> Viral and word-of-mouth marketing occur when information seeded to a few people is transmitted to others based on patterns of friendship. In other words, information is passed along to others at the whim of those who first receive that information. Within organizations, this process is essentially the grapevine at work. Employees transmit information to other people within their sphere of everyday interaction.

The grapevine might seem to transmit information in strange and unreliable ways, but there are two contrary arguments. First, the grapevine channel is becoming more robust and reliable, thanks to social media and other emerging forms of digital communication. These media have produced a stronger scaffolding than ever before, which potentially makes the grapevine more useful for transmitting information.

The second argument is that the grapevine tends to be more persuasive than traditional communication channels from management to

employees. The grapevine is based on social networks, which we discuss in the next chapter. Social networks are an important source of organizational power because they are built on trust, and trust increases acceptance of information sent through those networks. Consequently, the grapevine tends to be far more persuasive than other communication channels.

The power of the grapevine as a communication tool was illustrated when Novo Nordisk tried to change the image of its regulatory affairs staff.<sup>92</sup> The European pharmaceutical company made limited progress after a year of using traditional communication channels. “We had posters, meetings, competitions, and everything else you would expect,” recalls communication adviser Jakob Wolter. “By the end of it, we’d achieved something—a general awareness among our people—but very little else.”

So Novo Nordisk took another route. During the half-yearly gathering of all employees, nine regulatory staff were given wax-sealed confidential envelopes that assigned them to one of three “secret societies.” Between conference sessions, these employees met with the managing director, who assigned their manifesto, including a mandate and budget. They were also told to keep their mission secret, saying to inquisitive coworkers, “I can’t tell you.”

“The rumor mill started right there that day,” says Wolter. “People were already wondering what on earth was going on.” The societies were allowed to recruit more employees, which they did in subsequent months. Many employees throughout Novo Nordisk became intrigued, spreading their opinions and news to others. Meanwhile, empowered to improve their image and work processes, members of the three secret societies introduced several initiatives that brought about improvements.

## chapter summary

### 9-1 Explain why communication is important in organizations, and discuss four influences on effective communication encoding and decoding.

Communication refers to the process by which information is transmitted and *understood* between two or more people. Communication supports work coordination, organizational learning, decision making, the changing of others’ behavior, and employee well-being. The communication process involves forming, encoding, and transmitting the intended message to a receiver, who then decodes the message and provides feedback to the sender. Effective communication occurs when the sender’s thoughts are transmitted to and understood by the intended receiver. The effectiveness of this process depends

on whether the sender and receiver have similar codebooks, the sender’s proficiency at encoding that message to the audience, the sender’s and receiver’s motivation and ability to transmit messages through that particular communication channel, and their common mental models of the communication context.

### 9-2 Compare and contrast the advantages of and problems with electronic mail, other verbal communication media, and nonverbal communication.

The two main types of communication channels are verbal and nonverbal. Various forms of Internet-based communication are widely used in organizations, with email being the

most popular. Although efficient and a useful filing cabinet, email (and most other forms of written digital communication) is relatively poor at communicating emotions; it tends to reduce politeness and respect; it is an inefficient medium for communicating in ambiguous, complex, and novel situations; and it contributes to information overload. Social media, which are Internet- or mobile-based channels that allow users to generate and interactively share information, are slowly replacing or supplementing email in organizations. Social media are more conversational and reciprocally interactive than traditional channels. They are “social” by encouraging collaboration and the formation of virtual communities. Nonverbal communication includes facial gestures, voice intonation, physical distance, and even silence. Unlike verbal communication, nonverbal communication is less rule-bound and is mostly automatic and nonconscious. Some nonverbal communication is automatic through a process called emotional contagion.

**9-3 Discuss the relevance of synchronicity, social presence, social acceptance, and media richness when choosing the preferred communication channel.**

The most appropriate communication medium depends on several factors. Synchronicity refers to the channel’s capacity for the sender and receiver to communicate at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous). Synchronous channels are better when the issue is urgent or the topic is complex. Asynchronous channels are better when it is costly for both parties to communicate at the same time or when the receiver should have time to reflect before responding. A channel has high social presence when it creates psychological closeness to the other party and awareness of their humanness. This is valuable when the parties need to empathize or influence each other. Social acceptance refers to how well the communication medium is approved and supported by others. This acceptance depends on organization or societal norms, each party’s preferences and skills with the channel, and the symbolic meaning of a channel. Media richness refers to a channel’s data-carrying capacity. Nonroutine and ambiguous situations require rich media. However, technology-based lean media may be possible where users can multicomunicate, have high proficiency with that technology, and don’t have social distractions.

**9-4 Discuss various barriers (noise) to effective communication, including cross-cultural and gender-based differences in communication.**

Several barriers create noise in the communication process. People misinterpret messages because of misaligned codebooks due to different languages, jargon, and the use of ambiguous phrases. Filtering messages and information overload are two other communication barriers. These problems are often amplified in cross-cultural settings, where these problems occur, along with differences in the meaning of nonverbal cues, silence, and conversational overlaps. There are also some communication differences between men and women, such as the tendency for men to exert status and engage in report talk in conversations, whereas women use more rapport talk and are more sensitive to nonverbal cues.

**9-5 Explain how to get your message across more effectively, and summarize the elements of active listening.**

To get a message across, the sender must learn to empathize with the receiver, repeat the message, choose an appropriate time for the conversation, and be descriptive rather than evaluative. Listening includes sensing, evaluating, and responding. Active listeners support these processes by postponing evaluation, avoiding interruptions, maintaining interest, empathizing, organizing information, showing interest, and clarifying the message.

**9-6 Summarize effective communication strategies in organizational hierarchies, and review the role and relevance of the organizational grapevine.**

Some companies try to encourage communication across the organization through workspace design as well as through Internet-based communication channels. Some executives also meet directly with employees by engaging in management by walking around (MBWA) and by holding town-hall meetings.

In any organization, employees rely on the grapevine, particularly during times of uncertainty. The grapevine is an unstructured and informal network founded on social relationships rather than organizational charts or job descriptions. Although early research identified several unique features of the grapevine, some of these features may be changing as the Internet plays an increasing role in grapevine communication.

## key terms

communication, p. 248  
emotional contagion, p. 256  
grapevine, p. 270  
information overload, p. 263

management by walking around (MBWA), p. 269  
media richness, p. 259  
persuasion, p. 261

social presence, p. 258  
synchronicity, p. 257

## critical thinking questions

1. You have been hired as a consultant to improve communication between engineering and marketing staff in a large high-technology company. Use the communication model and the four ways to improve that process to devise strategies to improve communication effectiveness among employees between these two work units.
2. “An organization comes into being when people can communicate with each other.” Discuss the benefits and limitations of communicating with emails among team members.
3. Senior management at a consumer goods company wants you to investigate the feasibility of using a virtual reality

platform (such as Second Life) for quarterly online meetings involving its three dozen sales managers, located in several cities and countries. Evaluate the likely success of virtual reality platforms for these sales meetings. Refer to the four factors to consider when choosing the best communication channel (synchronicity, social presence, social acceptance, and media richness).

- Wikis are collaborative websites where anyone in the group can post, edit, or delete any information. Where might this communication technology be most useful in organizations?
- Under what conditions, if any, do you think it is appropriate to use email to notify an employee that he or she has

been laid off or fired? Why is email usually considered an inappropriate channel to convey this information?

- Suppose you are part of a virtual team and must persuade other team members on an important matter (such as switching suppliers or altering the project deadline). Assuming you cannot visit these people in person, what can you do to maximize your persuasiveness?
- Explain why men and women are sometimes frustrated with each other's communication behaviors.
- In your opinion, has the introduction of email and other information technologies increased or decreased the amount of information flowing through the corporate grapevine? Explain your answer.

## CASE STUDY: SILVER LINES: CHALLENGES IN TEAM COMMUNICATION

By Nuzhat Lotia, University of Melbourne

Exhausted by the day's events, Sarah slumped into the chair at her desk. She was feeling very frustrated, and sensed things were starting to fall apart. Silver Lines was such a successful business and they had such an effective team, but things were not looking as rosy as they had been even a year ago!

A decade ago, Sarah, along with her two friends Stephanie and Gloria and mentor Helen, started a small business to sell silver jewelry they had designed and made themselves. Sarah had always dreamed of owning her own business and had been following some successful female entrepreneurs on the internet. Inspired by their stories, Sarah decided to quit her job to set up her own business. She loved silver as a medium and was passionate about jewelry. She had delved into designing and making jewelry mainly as a hobby and had ended up selling a few pieces to friends and acquaintances. This was a path that appealed to her.

Sarah gazed out of her office window remembering those days filled with excitement and a sense of camaraderie. She had often worked 14 hours a day setting up the shop, located in a busy shopping strip in Melbourne, Australia. Although Stephanie and Gloria continued with their jobs, they worked at the shop in the evenings and on weekends. The business had taken off much faster than anyone had anticipated and soon they were sourcing silver products from other artisans in Australia. Their product lines expanded from jewelry to homeware, such as decorative pieces, boxes, candlesticks, plates and bowls, etc. Eighteen months later, they decided to open up another shop in Melbourne. A third shop followed soon after, and at this time Stephanie and Gloria left their jobs to join forces with Sarah and Helen.

Sarah and Helen were the creative team responsible for sourcing products and identifying suppliers. Stephanie was the management and IT expert, who managed their

inventory system and supplier database. Gloria was responsible for advertising and promotion. Success came in leaps and bounds. Five years after it began, the business had expanded and the group owned eight shops in shopping strips and shopping centers across metropolitan Melbourne plus two shops in New South Wales. Additionally, some small boutique shops in rural areas of the state (Victoria) carried their merchandise.

The four partners were joined by Erica and Juliana to form the management team. Erica was the finance and accounts manager. Juliana managed relationships with shops in rural Victoria that carried their products and investigated expansion opportunities. Silver Lines now employed about 55 staff, with each shop having a shop manager and four to six shift-based shop floor staff. The management team worked well together as they had developed a strong bond. Given the expansion of the business and their different roles, they tended to be out and about a lot. As the business had grown and as the founders had started families, they had made a commitment that they would all work flexibly in order to meet their family and parenting responsibilities.

Within this flexible work culture, a key to their effective management and business success was the fact that they had open and effective communication systems in place. For example, the management team met twice a month and rotated their meetings at each shop. This enabled them to stay in touch with shop staff as well as running their management meeting. In addition, they used emails, texts and phone calls to discuss any urgent matters. In the past year, however, it had become increasingly difficult to hold these meetings at different venues, and the last two meetings in the nearby state of New South Wales shops had to be cancelled because four of the six members could not travel due to some personal family commitments.

They also held retreats twice a year for all staff, which enabled employees to meet each other and management to discuss their plans with everyone. This way they were able to keep everyone connected. They had also recently started holding an “expo-meet” once a year at which they brought all of their existing and potential suppliers, designers and artisans together to discuss their requirements and trends and to see any exhibits that the participants brought with them. This they had found to be a very good way of developing and maintaining their ties with these important business associates. The expo-meet was a two-day event that started with a dinner the night before followed by two days of exhibitions, talks, seminars and meetings. While Juliana spearheaded the management of these events, they took up quite a bit of the entire management team’s time. Around the time of the annual expo, they usually ended up meeting every week and sometimes twice a week. Last year, while planning the annual expo-meet, however, attendance of the management team at these meetings had started to lag and Juliana had found this extremely frustrating. A couple of things had gone wrong at that expo-meet because it hadn’t been as immaculately planned as usual by the team. Juliana had felt very let down and there had been a fair bit of tension at the next management meeting.

Given these issues, Stephanie suggested that they should try out video conferencing, using Skype as a way to ensure attendance at meetings. Everyone liked the idea and once the initial teething and technical issues were resolved, virtual meetings using Skype became the norm. They found that they were able to get a lot more done and were saving travelling time and money as a result. Once they were comfortable with the system, they started including shop staff on a rotational basis. A few weeks later, though, Helen began to notice that the shop staff were not as forthcoming with their comments and feedback as they had been previously in the face-to-face meetings. This was particularly true of one of the Melbourne and one of the Sydney shops, where they had recently recruited new staff. Helen reflected on this issue but decided it was probably due to the fact that they were new to the team and would become more vocal as they become more comfortable in their jobs.

At one of the meetings with the Sydney staff, Helen asked whether the order that they had discussed at the previous meeting had arrived and how the sales were going. Surprised at the question, the shop manager Tanya asked which order she was referring to. It soon became clear to everyone that Tanya had not known that she was meant to follow up on the order. She said she remembered the conversation, but had thought that Helen was talking to Gloria about the order and not to her. Helen was shocked to hear this and was worried that they may have lost some very good business as a result of this confusion. The management team discussed how to resolve the issue and went on to talk through other agenda items on the list.

In the coming months, the management team realised that they were beginning to lose business and that some valuable external relationships were being affected. Every time this was questioned, it turned out that something had been misunderstood or misinterpreted. Staff members appeared confused about who was doing what, who was being addressed and who was taking what responsibility. There was some irritability and frustration building up, and at times this spilled into anger. The staff’s contribution in meetings was also no longer as vibrant as it used to be. Ingrid, who was a long-standing shop manager, felt that the process of meetings had changed and that management often seemed to be in a hurry to discuss and close off agenda items. There was a growing sense of unrest in the team, and although many people had picked up on it, team issues were not being discussed as before.

As Sarah sat at her desk now, she wished that Helen had brought up the issue when she first sensed it. She wished they had all said something about the tension they were starting to feel. Perhaps this would have prevented the disaster they had experienced today. It had been the opening day of this year’s expo-meet, which was being held at a town hall in Melbourne. There, they discovered that no one had booked the smaller rooms needed for the concurrent morning seminars. Juliana panicked on learning this and called Sarah out of the opening session to tell her what had happened. Sarah was equally shocked but kept her cool and started to consider what could be done. She asked Tanya to find out if there were any rooms available—this resulted in her booking the only available room.

Together, Juliana and Sarah decided to hold one seminar in the available room and the rest of the three seminars in different corners of the big hall where the opening session was held and the display stalls were laid out. While the seminars had taken place, the quality of discussions was compromised due to the colocation. They had received a few complaints from participants, who had found it difficult to hear the discussions. Juliana was very upset and angry, as were the others, who felt that their reputation had been tarnished. They discovered that once again there had been miscommunication among them over who was going to book the seminar rooms. The planning for the event had been done primarily through Skype meetings and telephone communication. Sarah sat there thinking that they needed to get back to meeting face-to-face: “Clearly this new technology has worsened things for us!”

### Discussion Questions

1. What made communication at Silver Lines effective initially?
2. How did the use of Skype impact this effectiveness?
3. What could the management team do to improve technology-based communication?

## TEAM EXERCISE: CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION GAME

**PURPOSE** This exercise is designed to develop and test your knowledge of cross-cultural differences in communication and etiquette.

**MATERIALS** The instructor will provide one set of question/answer cards to each pair of teams.

### INSTRUCTIONS

*Step 1:* The class is divided into an even number of teams. Ideally, each team would have three students. (Two- or four-student teams are possible if matched with an equal-sized team.) Each team is then paired with another team and the paired teams (Team "A" and Team "B") are assigned a private space, away from other matched teams.

*Step 2:* The instructor will hand each pair of teams a stack of cards with the multiple choice questions face down. These cards have questions and answers about cross-cultural differences in communication and etiquette. No books or other aids are allowed.

*Step 3:* The exercise begins with a member of Team A picking up one card from the top of the pile and asking the question on that card to the members of Team B. The information given to Team B includes the question and all alternatives listed on the card. Team B has 30 seconds after the question and alternatives have been read to give an answer. Team B earns one point if the correct answer is given. If Team B's answer is incorrect, however, Team A earns that point. Correct answers to each question are indicated on the card and, of course, should not be revealed until the question is correctly answered or time is up. Whether or not Team B answers correctly, it picks up the next card on the pile and reads it to members of Team A. In other words, cards are read alternatively to each team. This procedure is repeated until all of the cards have been read or time has expired. The team receiving the most points wins.

**Important note:** The textbook provides very little information pertaining to the questions in this exercise. Rather, you must rely on past learning, logic, and luck to win.

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