

It ain't what you do

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It was most amusing recently to hear about the mobile phone company boss who had decided to ban his staff from using e-mail. Lots of free publicity was lavished upon this unorthodox stance, allowing the company to quote some arbitrary figures for the amount of staff time and therefore money that would be saved and also giving their product, the good old phone, a massive plug.

This spectacle was interesting from a number of perspectives; the first and most obvious being the fact that banning staff from using e-mail was sufficiently unusual to be worthy of a slot on the prime time national news! Ten years ago hardly anyone in business had regular access to e-mail and most organisations were pretty sceptical about the benefits.

Whatever the merits of the specific case and the cost benefit analysis quoted in the news, there is no doubt that e-mail has its limitations (as do letters, phone calls, faxes, text messages, semaphore and Morse code). Face to face communication is generally acknowledged to be the best way to exploit the full richness of human interaction with all the subtleties of body language, facial expression and intonation. However, whilst this is undoubtedly true it's hardly the point. The simple fact remains that in business we need to be able to communicate effectively (and cheaply) with people who are not immediately accessible and, equally importantly, we sometimes need a permanent record of the communication. E-mail meets both of these requirements in a most timely and cost effective manner.

Successful communication remains one of the great challenges of business life, a fact that is quite independent of the media adopted. Be it advertising a new product, explaining the coffee rota, dealing politely with a customer complaint or writing a technical specification, we do it all the time. Most of the problems we face in meeting customer expectations or getting on with our colleagues can be put down to failures in communication.

It's not even as if people react to different types of communication in the same way. It may be true that the sales department, staffed as it probably is by extroverts impervious to feelings of rejection, use e-mail primarily for circulating the latest jokes to everyone they have ever met but will reach for the phone at the slightest sniff of a lead. Other more introverted souls may be very reticent to put forward their opinions face to face or on the phone, but respond in their own time and with careful thought to an e-mail.

E-mail does have its problems however, not least the volume of information it can generate both from bulk mail campaigns, much of which appears to be aimed at undermining the morale of the entire male population, and from well intentioned inclusion of everyone who could possibly be

interested in every conversation. The indiscriminate use of the 'cc' function to shirk responsibility for an action or outcome can be particularly corrosive if left unchallenged.

My overall conclusion is that there is no such thing as a good or bad communications medium, there is simply effective and ineffective use of the tools available. Written communication is always prone to accidental ambiguity (which is why lawyers get paid so much to write things that no one understands), whilst face to face communication is subject to other problems based on hierarchy, charisma, politeness etc. To be truly effective communication is a two part process, first we have to say what we mean and then we have to confirm that the other party has understood what we said. In practice it is the second part of the equation which is most often neglected, and this is particularly true when it comes to e-mail which makes it so easy to rattle off a couple of sentences about something and then wash our hands of the matter. When being understood is important then the phone can be a very effective way to confirm that an e-mail has served its purpose.

There is no getting away from it, when it comes to communication... it's the way that you do it, that's what gets results".