Unit 2: E-mail or Informal Writing

Communication issues for a virtual team

The methods in which projects are structured and organised have changed with the pace of technology. As information and communications technology has advanced, so has the frequency of project teams which function in a virtual environment. Until recently, a project team was either centrally located (all team members in the same close proximity) or connected together via courier service and air travel (regular travel to meet face–to-face was an advisable, cost-effective and secure method of maintaining control over teams. The internet and email revolution changed all of this.

Nowadays, video conferencing, application-sharing technologies and other technological advances have enabled project teams to be assembled with talent from throughout the world, regardless of location while minimising location costs. Communications technologies are so readily available that a virtual project team member is now commonplace in today's working environment. Depending upon the industry in which one operates, the percentage of virtual team members on a project will vary and in some cases an entire project team may be virtual – meaning no two members geographically live or work in the same location, nor physically meet very often.

The basic theory of communication involves a sender, a receiver, a message and a medium. When the medium of the message is virtual, such as email or instant messaging, risks exist in that the "intended message" may not be the "message received", email and similar tools do not give one the emphasis, inflection, tone, or body language that can be achieved with face-to-face contact, or to a lesser extent by phone.

Project members can all probably remember having sent an email or instant message only to live to regret it as the intended message was misinterpreted and ended up requiring far more work and communication to resolve the miscommunication than the time taken to write the original email message. Lack of body language, tone, facial expressions and hand gestures make it very difficult to effectively communicate across all forms of virtual communication, especially when cultural and generational differences are factored into the equation.

The following table highlights some of the main communication forms and advice about the best use and what to avoid for virtual teams.

Communication medium	Potential uses in Virtual Teams	Best to Avoid
E-mails	send project updates, company updates, deliver or requests documents and in some cases assign tasks. Key: ensure relevant subject line, keep e-mails brief and concise and remember to consider the audience.	do not send messages with "emotional content", multiple topics or criticisms, these should be dealt with face-to-face or telephone.
Instant messages	use for confirmations or exact clarifications (e.g., meeting room change)	do not request approval, sign-off or formal commitments to complicated tasks.
Telephone	contact for general discussions, clarify simple questions, deal with one-one interaction, or maintain cohesion.	do not use if multiple parties need to be involved and don't leave messages without clear details
Conference calls	use for regular project updates	avoid sensitive discussions or where individuals are "singled out"
Video conference	decide whether the visual element improves communication, similar to call	do not use for unimportant events as adds to cost
Face-to-face	celebrate or "fix" important tasks and events, begin and end projects, use for training and major milestones.	don't forget those that might not be able to travel, always include necessary updates or information to all parties.