

WHAT IS THE MOST APPROPRIATE FORM OF COMMUNICATION?

by James Mitchell

Note -- This essay has not yet been written. Several people have asked that I post it because they were interested in the sections I have written. I hope to finish it by November, 2007.

Humans crave communication, and we spend most of our waking hours communicating with other humans. There are numerous possible forms of communication, which I will discuss in this essay. What amazes me is how little thought people give to which form of communication is most appropriate under the circumstances.¹

A. FACTORS TO CONSIDER

In determining which form of communication is optimal, factors you should consider include:

1. [Urgency and immediacy](#)
2. [Response time](#)
3. [Is the communication one-way or two-way?](#)
4. [Do you want to memorialize the conversation?](#)
5. [Accuracy](#)
6. [Thoughtfulness](#)

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7. [Formality](#)
8. [Subtlety of communication](#)
9. [Posturing](#)
10. [Focus and concentration](#)
11. [Digging deep](#)
12. [Ease of process](#)
13. [Time synchronization](#)
14. [Ability to complete the process](#)
15. [Follow-up](#)
16. [Did the message get through](#)
17. [How much time is involved?](#)
18. [Technology](#)
19. [Cost](#)
20. [Obtrusiveness](#)
21. [Other person's preferences](#)

A-1 Urgency and Immediacy

If you need to talk with someone right away, you would presumably telephone them rather than send them a letter.

A-2 Response Time

If you need an immediate response, telephone or instant messaging (“IM”) would be more appropriate than, say, e-mail.

A-3 Is the Communication One-Way or Two-Way?

You should always ask yourself if the communication one-way to two-way. Should it be interactive or a monologue?

If it is one way, then often a telephone call does not make sense. (The need for urgency might override this, however. This was a classic mistake one of my former partners would make. He would visit a company we were thinking of purchasing and then telephone me with a 20 minute report. He was simply providing information, he wasn't

necessarily looking for an initial response for me. It would have made much more sense for him to send me an e-mail, which I could read at my leisure. In addition, most people absorb complex information better in writing than orally. After reading that e-mail, I could have called him and discussed what he wrote.

Many people make the opposite mistake — they use e-mail when the communication requires constant back and forth. Imagine a communication exchange that requires 20 backs and forth. Most people do not answer their e-mails immediately. If both sides each took one day to respond to an e-mail, then it would take 40 days to complete the process. If they talked on the phone, or used instant messaging, they could complete the process in one phone call or one IM session.

A-4 Do you Want to Memorialize the Conversation?

Sometimes you want a record of the conversation. If so, e-mail would be preferable to a telephone call. Almost every instant messaging package allows you to save a conversation.

A-5 Accuracy

Sometimes you want to be certain that the other person remembers all of the details of the conversation. Once a month my assistant orders office supplies for my company. We've learned the hard way that if we telephone in an order, they will foul up the order. So we print out a form, fill in how many we want of each item, and then fax it to them. Doing so drastically reduces the odds of them screwing up the order.

A-6 Thoughtfulness

Sometimes you want to make certain that your response is thoughtful and/or that the other person's response is thoughtful. In that cases, telephone or IM would not make sense. E-mail would be preferred, or even better, you might send a fax, since when people write a reply letter, they are more likely to be thoughtful than if they dash off an e-mail.

A-7 Formality

Sometimes you want your response to be formal. An opinion by a law firm, opining on the legality of a complex reverse triangular merger tax structure you are contemplating, should be not written in an e-mail; clearly a formal opinion letter would be more appropriate.

And sometimes you deliberately want to be informal. E-mail is good with that, since most people feel very comfortable with that.

A-8 Subtlety of Communication

In e-mail, you run the risk of miscommunication. Telephone offers less risk, while an in-person meeting offers the least chance of miscommunication.

A-9 Posturing

A friend of mine purchased a company that was a defendant in three dozen lawsuits. (Its price was substantially reduced the purchase price because of this litigation.) After the deal was closed, he managed the process of settling these disputes. He learned that the form of communication with opposing counsel determined how much posturing there was. If he communicated in writing with them, he usually received back a total B.S. response — outrageous demands, no indication of flexibility, “We look forward to seeing you in court.” On the telephone, opposing counsel was very different. They were willing to acknowledge weaknesses in their case and that their offer was a lowball offer. They were often willing to discuss how serious their client was and how much flexibility there was with the proposal on the table. My friend found that he could usually reach an agreement on the phone and only after he did so did he send any written communication.

A-10 Focus and Concentration

Sometimes you want you and the other side to focus completely on the conversation. In that case, an in-person meeting, with the doors closed that your secretary ordered not to permit any interruptions unless there really is a fire, makes sense. If you send them an e-mail, they have 100 other things to do. If you telephone them, they could be distracted on the telephone. If you and they are the only people in a conference room, they have no choice but to focus on you.

A-11 Digging Deep

Sometimes you want to dig deep and probe what they are really thinking. In that case, you're best off meeting in person. Second choice would be a telephone call. If the communication is oral, people are more willing to say what they are really thinking. If the communication is written, in most cases you will not be able to find out what they are really thinking.

A-12 Ease of Process

The easier the process, the more likely you are to communicate. There is nothing easier than pressing the reply button on your e-mail package — this is why there are so many backs-and-forth in e-mail. Compare that to writing a letter. You have to find pen and paper, and then an envelope. You write the letter. Then you have to find a stamp, assuming you know the correct postage. Then you have to find a mailbox. It's no wonder so few letters are written anymore. One factor is how easy is it to find their phone number or e-mail address? In my Rolodex, there are lots of people where I only have their e-mail address or vice versa. In those case, that form of communication will be used even if it is not the optimal one, since I usually don't have the time or energy to find out the other information I need.

A-13 Time Synchronization

Oral and in-person communications require that you and the other person communicate at the same time. If you send an e-mail, the other person can read it when it is most convenient for them, and vice versa. This is a huge advantage. Sometimes when I can't sleep I will go to my computer and type e-mails, with the other person wondering, "Was he really writing this at 4:15 a.m.?"

A-14 Ability to Complete the Process

Sometime you simply want to finish the matter, to get the process done. In those cases, I much prefer a phone call, because it is easier to pin the other side down on what else do they need, what other objections do they have.

A-15 Follow-up

Note -- Outlook 2003.

E-mail is easier for follow-ups than most other forms of communication. If I want to track a response, when I send someone an e-mail, I'll bcc myself. The e-mail I receive I file in my "E-Mails to Follow-up On" folder. Once a week, I look in this folder. If they haven't responded, I simply send the e-mail again.

In Fall, 2005, I realized that I was dealing with so many people that statistically there will be a meaningful number of people who are terrible about responding. So I wrote a database in Microsoft Access, which I call my "E-Mail Follow-up System." In the database, I can add an individual, their e-mail address, and the e-mail message I want to continue to send to them. Once I week I run a mail merge which reads this database and

send the e-mail message to the designated person. They will continue to receive the same e-mail message each week until they respond.

The beauty of this is obvious. I simply have to remember to run the mail merge once a week. (In reality, I have written a macro to do this automatically.) I don't have to do anything else. The people on the other end receive the same e-mail over and over, and each time they have to deal with it. Eventually over 95 percent of the people respond.

There is a further advantage to this system. People learn what my expectations are — if I write to them seeking a response, they should respond; otherwise, they will continue to receive the same e-mail over and over. As a result, I get treated better than other people, and perhaps over time they will learn that they should treat no one this way.

A-16 Did the Message Get Through?

A-17 How much Time is Involved?

Travel Time

This is a disadvantage of in-person meetings — some travel time is always involved. If you're traveling long distance to meet someone, the airlines have done such a great job of making your trip so pleasant and enjoyable.

Waiting Time

One should always calculate how much waiting time there might be. Waiting time for in-person meetings can be quite long. If you visit your doctor, you might wait an hour. If you meet someone for a drink, they could be 30 minutes late.

Waiting time can also be relevant for other forms of communication. If you telephone your typical large bureaucratic company, you could enter a maze of "Enter 1, then 2, then the # sign, then enter 17 pieces of information about yourself. Then you wait 15 minutes. Somehow all this information isn't captured by their system, so when you finally reach a live person, they ask all of this information over again. They then realize you have reached the wrong department, or the call center has been outsourced to a country you didn't know existed and no one in the entire country speaks English.

If you have an e-mail address you could write to, you could dash off an e-mail and then do something else while you await your response. This assumes, of course, that they respond to e-mail; they might not.

A-18 Technology

Some forms of communication require that both sides have access to certain technologies. If your friend does not have a computer and does not have access to one, e-mail would not be a good choice. Everyone agrees that videoconferencing offers a lot of potential, but very few people have access to videoconferencing.

A-19 Cost

Travel, particularly long distance travel, can be expensive.

Cost can be a factor in other forms of communication. Overnight delivery — particularly Fedex, which is significantly more expensive than other overnight delivery services — can be quite expensive. I used to use a law firm that Fedex every letter to me, no matter how time unurgent it was. Needless to say, they carefully tracked all of their Fedexes and billed me for this cost. I now use another law firm. (Nowadays, almost any law would e-mail or fax you the letter.)

Although the cost of text messaging is now high, people are using text messaging so much that some people are paying \$200 a month for text messaging.

Long distance telephone calls are now so inexpensive that no one makes a distinction between local and long distance calls. International calls, however, are often quite expensive, and one should certainly explore using Internet telephone for them.

Videoconferencing can be quite expensive, particularly if you use an outside conferencing center.

A-20 Obtrusiveness

Some forms of communication are more obtrusive than others. If you telephone someone, you don't know what they are doing when you call. Perhaps they went to bed at 8 p.m. that evening and you woke them up. If you send them an e-mail, they can read and answer the e-mail at their leisure. The more time synchronization is required, the most obtrusive the form of communication will be.

A-21 Other Person's Preferences

Note -- Dating

Applicants

People joining my party.

You should always consider the other person's preferences. I am very open almost all forms of communication, but I don't use text messaging. I have a few friends who text message all the time. Even though I repeatedly tell them I don't use this technology, they continue to text message me. I simply ignore their text messages and perhaps in the future — maybe decades from now — they might realize that sending me a text message is a waste of time.

B. SECURITY ISSUES

Security issues are now such a concern that they merit their own section. These include:

1. [Interception](#)
2. [Viruses and spyware](#)
3. [Alteration of the message](#)
4. [Loss of data](#)

B-1 Interception

B-2 Viruses and Spyware

B-3 Alteration of the Message

B-4 Loss of Data

C. FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

The forms I will discuss are:

1. [E-mail](#)
2. [E-mail with attachments](#)
3. [Bulletin boards](#)
4. [Instant messaging](#)
5. [Text Messaging](#)
6. [Fax](#)

7. [Letters](#)
8. [Memos and reports](#)
9. [Websites](#)
10. [Blogs](#)
11. [U.S. Postal Service](#)
12. [Messenger services](#)
13. [Telephone](#)
14. [Internet telephone](#)
15. [Conference calls](#)
16. [Videoconferencing](#)
17. [On-line meetings and conferencing](#)
18. [In-person](#)
19. [Meetings](#)
20. [Off-site meetings](#)

C-1 E-mail

E-mail is essentially free (ignoring the value of your time), almost immediate, almost universal (at least for the people I know — I don't know many peasants in Tibet), and easy. That's why it is so popular.

It has many disadvantages. In many cases, it encourages too much communication — perhaps that last e-mail really doesn't merit a response. People are often sloppy when they write e-mails.

In addition, e-mails' zero cost and ease of use means people e-mail stuff you don't want to receive. I am forwarded jokes that I really don't want to read. Most chain letters do not interest me. I really don't need to know about the weekly Salsa night of a restaurant in Duxbury I went to three years ago and made the mistake of giving them my business card.

The ultimate in unwanted e-mail is, of course, spam. See my essay, [On Spam](#).

There are some other disadvantages to e-mail.

Notice that I said “almost universal” rather than universal. I do know a couple of people who do not have e-mail. (The ones that most amuse me are acquaintances who do not have e-mail and expect me to telephone them before each party and invite them.)

Different people are more or less diligent about checking their e-mails. I have lots of friends at Harvard and MIT who check their e-mail 5 or 10 times a day. They access their Webmail accounts through a Web browser at school, or use Wifi to read e-mail on their own computer. Others I know only check their e-mail once or twice a week. (And then they complain that I held an impromptu smaller cocktail party and they couldn't attend because they did not read the invitation in time.)

Some people have multiple e-mail accounts, some of which they check several times a day and some of which they check once a week. In that case, please give me the e-mail address of the account you check every day.

One of the most significant disadvantages of e-mail is that people receive too much of it, and thus many people never answer the e-mail you send to them. They see it, they read it, they have 100 other things to do, so they keep it in their In Box. Another 100 e-mails come in that day, each one of which they have to spend at least a few seconds on. So your e-mails get lower and lower in their In Box and soon basically evaporates into the bottom tar pits of their In Box. Sometimes much later — it could be 5 months later — they say, “Oh my God, my best friend sent me an e-mail saying he was just about to be kidnapped by terrorists and he asked me to notify the authorities. I hope he hasn't been killed in the process.”

[David Allen](#) urges us to reduce your In Box to zero at the end of the day, a practice I have been following for several years. Almost all e-mail I simply respond to right away, even if a particular e-mail will require a 5-minute response. You develop a rhythm, a groove, as you bang off e-mail after e-mail. For the few that require too much time, I move them to a “James will process” folder *and* I print them out, putting them in an “Important E-Mails” paper folder I have. I can't recommend this enough. As a start, commit to respond to or otherwise handle every e-mail you receive today, plus eliminate 25 or 50 e-mails from your In Box. Pretty soon, your In Box will be empty.

C-2 E-Mail with Attachments

E-mail with attachments offers several advantages. When my new law firm send me a letter, they do so via e-mail. I don't pay for the Fedex cost, and I have a clean copy of the actual letter (as opposed to fax, where the quality is not as good).

You can attach almost any kind of file — pictures, sound, even video.

Attachments have many disadvantages:

When you send an e-mail, you are using the SMTP protocol, which is not equipped to handle very large files (It was written when it was very unusual to have a file

that exceeded 1 megabyte.) Thus, e-mail is not a good way to distribute large computer files. (You would probably use FTP instead.)

Note -- DropSend.

Virus scanners sometimes reject certain attachments when they shouldn't. This is called a false positive.

In Microsoft Outlook, when I send or receive an attachment, the attached file is stored in my Outlook .pst file (Outlook's central repository of e-mails), which increases the size of my .pst file. (I've receive so many e-mails that I've had to break my .pst file into four different .pst files.) As a result, when I receive an attachment, I copy the file to my hard disk and then delete the attachment.

Outlook and Eudora store attachments in different ways. See my essay, What's wrong with e-mail packages.

C-3 Bulletin Boards

C-4 Instant Messaging

(Mention how I use it for telephone negotiations)

C-5 Text Messaging

C-6 Fax

C-7 Letters

C-8 Memos and Reports

C-9 Web Sites

C-10 Blogs

C-11 U.S. Postal Service

C-12 Messenger Services

C-13 Telephone

C-14 Internet Telephone

C-15 Conference Calls

(Most phone systems do not do conference calls very well. You can't hear the person.)

C-16 Videoconferencing

C-17 On-Line Meetings and Conferencing

C-18 In-Person

At work, there often is too much personal interaction between people that are physically close to each other. If it is a one-way form of communication, and it's not urgent, then wouldn't sending an e-mail make more sense?

C-19 Meetings

This is a form of in-person interaction, but it involves more than one person. Most meetings are a complete waste of time.

C-20 Off-Site Meetings

D. SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

There are several specific situations that merit special mention:

1. [Setting up an appointment](#)
2. [Business negotiations](#)
3. [On-line dating](#)

C-1 Setting Up an Appointment

C-2 Business Negotiations

C-3 On-Line Dating

E. OTHER ESSAYS

I've written several other essays that may be of interest:

Total Cost of Interaction

www.BostonConvivium.com/jm_essays/total_cost_of_interaction

Time Management and David Allen

www.BostonConvivium.com/jm_essays/david_allen

On Spam

www.BostonConvivium.com/jm_essays/on_spam

A list of my essays is available at www.BostonConvivium.com/jm_essays/list.

WORK SPACE

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