

Electronic Communications vs. Personal Contact

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Technological advances in communications have changed the way communication occurs. While computer-mediated communication (CMC) methods (i.e., text, email, etc.) are used daily in construction management, personal contact is also cited as a requirement for successful construction management operations and long-term business relationships. However, personal contact communication protocols and expectations appear to be different from those that govern CMC. The differences might have an inherent generational bias caused by communication technologies prevalent during a manager's formative years. This paper discusses the impact of communication mediums, protocols, and expectations associated with their use on project team efficiencies and interactions.

Keywords: face to face, personal contact, computer mediated communication, email, text messages

Introduction

Most would probably agree that technological advancements occurring since the late 1970's positively influenced operations and efficiencies in the construction industry. Starting with personal computers, electronic equipment and media have changed, and even revolutionized, in some ways, how the industry conducts work. Personal computers impacted how construction documents were generated; the internet impacted, for example, how documents and other information is assimilated, disseminated, and conveyed (Axley, 2000; Brock & Zhou, 2005; Clampitt, 2005). Cell phone networks and satellite communications in conjunction with improvements and cost reductions in memory, electronic storage, software, and PDA devices that utilize these elements have led to marked improvements in equipment and worker efficiencies, and more methods available for communication. Email is described as being one of the most widely used communication technologies (Katz & Rice, 2002; Minsky & Marin, 1999).

Today's generation of younger construction and project managers have grown up in a world that has incorporated the aforementioned communication methods and devices, defined for this paper as computer-mediated communication (CMC), into their everyday lives. Quan-Haase & Wellman (2004) state that "although computer-mediated communication (i.e., electronic communication) is contributing to new forms of interaction in organizations that blend e-mail, instant messaging, face-to-face, and telephone communication for internal and external interactions, workers do not choose [that medium] simply because it is cheaper and more convenient. They habitually use computers because they are sitting at keyboards and screens all day; [as a result,] they habitually use computers for many tasks, and they regard computers [...] as routine means of communication rather than exotic media for special circumstances." The same is true of today's hand-held electronic devices and wireless systems.

The advent of these technological advancements has also led to the development of social media, other communication forums and forms, and the proliferation of communication via text messaging and email. Communication via email, text messaging, or related forms, are second nature to most construction managers under age 30. For many of today's younger work force, they are a preferred means of communication. Tweets and text messages, in many cases, have taken on a communication form of their own; a form that does not, necessarily, adhere to those standards that have traditionally governed personal contact communication mediums. Electronic communication mediums are also staples in many of today's business cultures. However, researchers warn that although "comfort and convenience may encourage [electronic communication use] across geographically dispersed areas and different time zones, [...] regarding this communication offhandedly as routine presents an inherent danger to organizations" (Hinds & Kiesler, 1995 as cited in Kupritz & Cowell, 2011).

This paper investigates the impacts of the use of electronic communication mediums vs. personal contact mediums in construction management. It evaluates the impacts those communications mediums and their use protocols on the construction industry, as instituted by those who grew up using them as an extension of their everyday lives. In part, the paper investigates whether generational communication norms might lead to organizational and performance

inefficiencies if communication protocols are not clearly spelled out within companies. Electronic communication is defined for this paper as asynchronous CMC methods, e.g. email, text, etc. Personal contact is defined as synchronous methods, e.g. telephone (both cell and land), video conferencing, and other voice-to-voice, voice-to-face, or face-to-face communication.

Survey Development

Development of the parameters for this study was aided by a discussion on the topic posted in the Construction Management group on the Linked-In network. The topic, entitled “Electronic Communication vs. Personal Contact,” in part, posed the following question:

“Are there certain tasks, situations, categories, or areas of your job that you have found it necessary or mandatory to use personal communication (cell phone, land-line, video conferencing, face to face) vs. electronic communication (text messages, emails, or similar), and what’s the primary reason why (for example, response time, tone required to convey proper message, urgency, etc., or whatever the reason)? Have you found this to be an issue, and if so, with whom (younger workers, more experienced workers, etc.)? Are there certain tasks, situations, categories, or areas of your job that you have found it better/more appropriate to use electronic communication, and why?”

There were over 20 responses to the question, and most were extended responses. The comments revealed that communication problem areas in construction management resulting from medium choice are similar to those that Gale listed (see Appendix). Hence, the following topic areas were identified as areas for investigation:

- (1) General Project Communications Protocols**
- (2) Personal Business Communications Preferences**
- (3) Task Specific Communications Protocols**
- (4) Communication Method Response and Response Time**
- (5) Documentation Issues Associated With Communication Medium Choice**
- (6) Team Interaction Issues Resulting From Communication Method Choice**
- (7) Discussion/Negotiation Give And Take Perspectives Associated With Communication Method Choice**

Additional questions used to identify respondent characteristics were also included in the survey. The survey was posted on the Linked-In Construction Management Group site, and sent to construction management companies, Northern Kentucky University (NKU) CM graduates, current NKU students who are employed in construction, and construction managers and project team members personally known by the authors.

Respondent Groupings

Respondent groupings were designed to extract generational differences in communication norms and methods. The time periods described below represent generalized time periods; they are not intended to connote hard and fast intervals and/or boundaries.

Group Categories

Less than 5 Years Experience. This category is intended to include respondents who were, generally, 22/23 years old when they received their degree, and/or those who started working at an average age of 20. Hence, this would include people who were typically youth/teen-agers between 2003 and 2009. This coincides with the time period when text messaging became popular and flat rate cost for service became the norm.

5 to 15 Years Experience. This category is intended to include the period between 1991 and 2000, which is the time when America On-Line (AOL) was at its peak and when it also merged with Time Warner. Respondents in this grouping would have been, generally, youth/teen-agers during the period home-based email became popular.

15 to 25 Years Experience. This category is intended to cover the period starting, approximately, around 1980 and upwards to about 1990. This period marks the advent of the personal computer and the years immediately following when the use of business-based software started to become the norm for business operations. Windows-based software, which hastened the use of technical software in the Engineering/Construction industry, was also developed in the mid to later portion of this category group period.

Over 25 Years of Experience. Pre-personal computer for this survey; it connotes the period prior to 1980.

Selected Survey Results

Established Project Communications Protocols

Table 1 summarizes survey results from questions that examined the existence and use of company and/or project team communication protocols. Results indicate that over 60% of respondents stated their company had no official communication protocols in place. There is no appreciable difference in the response to this question when it is examined by group category. Companies with no communications protocols in place might consider the impacts of this on their companies. If it's a case of employees not knowing company communications protocols, this, also should be investigated. Guz states, "[C]ompanies seeking to apply controls to electronic messaging will need to craft and adopt a clearly stated, organization wide messaging policy. Such a policy will articulate the company's official position regarding electronic messaging, and will provide guidance to employees by letting them know what their employer expects of them. Equally important, an effective policy also projects an image of corporate good faith, serves as evidence of a company's intention to responsibly manage its messaging technology, and will withstand scrutiny during litigation, audit, or investigation" (Guz, 2004). Guz goes on to say, "it is a common practice for companies to leave the creation of messaging policies to the IT department. This is a mistake. Before revising an existing policy or drafting a new one, it is critical to bring together the key players who will provide input on and, ultimately, approve such policy. This requires gathering representation from such departments as legal, compliance, records management, senior management, and operations. The creation of a cross-functional, collaborative team will not only ensure support from these key stakeholders, but is also more likely to result in a policy that comprehensively addresses all of the relevant issues." For construction companies, this includes senior project team managers and key managers.

Email Swapping

Email swapping is cited as an area where communication inefficiency can occur. Table 2 summarizes the results of

Table 1

<i>Established Project Communications Protocols</i>						
Question No.	Const. Experience	< 5 years % (n)	5 - 15 years % (n)	15 - 25 years % (n)	> 25 years % (n)	Total % (n)
Q9. Does your company or project team(s) have protocols in place that dictate or govern when electronic and/or personal communication can/should be used?	No	27 (14)	22 (11)	6 (3)	6 (3)	61 (31)
	Yes	18 (9)	12 (6)	2 (1)	8 (4)	39 (20)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q10. When no company or project comm. protocols exist, do you ask if project team members have a preferred method of comm. (i.e., email, text, or personal)?	No	8 (4)	12 (6)	2 (1)	4 (2)	26 (13)
	Yes	38 (19)	20 (10)	6 (3)	10 (5)	74 (37)
	Total	46 (23)	32 (16)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (50)

two of the questions used to investigate this area. Most respondents (over 80%) agreed that a maximum of two to three exchanges is an allowable limit for resolving issues by email. Most respondents (over 70%) agreed that more than three exchanges would be an inefficient use of time and resources if continued attempts to resolve the issue by email were used. The 5 to 15 year experience category group is a slight outlier to this result (only 62%) when responses to this questions were evaluated by category group. This category group represents respondents who normally would have been in their formative years during the period that home-based email became popular. The highest percentages of respondents finding more than three email exchanges acceptable are those in the less than 5 years experience group category. Over 21% (5 of 23) of the respondents believed four or more email exchanges is acceptable. Over 18% (3 of 16) and 14% (1 of 7) respondents in the 5 to 15 years experience and over 25 years experience group categories, respectively, found four or more email exchanges to resolve an issue acceptable. The smaller percentage seen in the over 25 years experience group might indicate a generational difference in communication medium use vs. that of their younger counterparts; however, the authors recognize that the smaller number of respondents in over 25 years experience category might influence the results.

Communication Medium Use vs. Response Time Requirements

Table 3 summarizes results of questions used to measure respondent preferences of communication medium choice when response time is a factor. Results show that 90% of respondents indicate that personal communication (i.e., connoted as “talk” in the table) is their preferred means of communication when answers are needed immediately. The percentage of respondents preferring personal communication decreases significantly when the time urgency changes to response needed in “one to three hours.” Only 39% of the respondents selected personal communication as their preferred choice in that instance, while 61% selected electronic communication (45% and 16% for email and text, respectively) when responses are needed within that timeframe. However, over 50% of respondents in the 15 to 25 year and over 25 year experience groups selected personal communication when responses are needed within one to three hours. The percentage of respondents selecting personal communication as their preference further decreases when the time urgency is between four hours and by the end of the day. Only 22% of respondents selected personal communication; email and text was chosen by 70% and 8% of respondents, respectively. However, more than 50% of respondents in the more than 25 year experience group chose face to face communication as their preferred choice when responses are required before the end of the day. Over 80% of respondents selected email when response time urgency is next day or longer. No appreciable generational differences are seen when comparing responses from the less than 5 years experience group and the over 25 years experience group when response time is next day or longer. However, no respondent in the 5 to 15 year and 15 to 25 year experience category groups selected personal communication as a preferred choice for medium use when response time requirement is greater than 24 hours. Those were the two age groups whose formative years might have been influenced by personal computing hardware and software development, and by advent of home-based email. The significant reductions in face to face communication as the preferred choice when responses are required immediately deserves some further discussion. Also, the corresponding rise in electronic communication when

Table 2

Question No.	Const. Experience	<i>Email Swapping</i>				Total % (n)
		< 5 years % (n)	5 - 15 years % (n)	15 - 25 years % (n)	> 25 years % (n)	
Q27. When discussing an issue using email or text messages, and prior to its resolution, how many emails exchanges do you allow or think is acceptable before switching to personal contact to resolve the issue?	1 email	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	2 emails	16 (8)	10 (5)	6 (3)	4 (2)	36 (18)
	3 emails	20 (10)	16 (8)	2 (1)	8 (4)	46 (23)
	4 emails	4 (2)	6 (3)	0 (0)	2 (1)	12 (6)
	5 emails	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	6 emails	6 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (3)
	Total	46 (23)	32 (16)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (50)
Q28. Do you believe to continue to send e-mail responses beyond the range selected in Q27 is inefficient use of time and resources to resolve the issue under discussion?	No	8 (4)	12 (6)	2 (1)	4 (2)	26 (13)
	Yes	38 (19)	20 (10)	6 (3)	10 (5)	74 (37)
	Total	46 (23)	32 (16)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (50)

Table 3
Communications Medium Use vs. Response Time Requirements

Question No.	Const. Experience	< 5 years % (n)	5 - 15 years % (n)	15 - 25 years % (n)	> 25 years % (n)	Total % (n)
Q29. What communication medium are you more likely / to use if you need a response immediately?	Email	0 (0)	2 (1)	2 (1)	4 (2)	8 (4)
	Talk	43 (22)	31 (16)	6 (3)	10 (5)	90 (46)
	Text	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q30. What communication medium are you more likely / to use if you need a response in one to three hours?	Email	20 (10)	18 (9)	2 (1)	6 (3)	45 (23)
	Talk	16 (8)	12 (6)	4 (2)	8 (4)	39 (20)
	Text	10 (5)	4 (2)	2 (1)	0 (0)	16 (8)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q31. What communication medium are you more likely to use if you need a response between four hours and by the end of the day?	Email	33 (17)	25 (13)	6 (3)	6 (3)	70 (36)
	Talk	6 (3)	6 (3)	2 (1)	8 (4)	22 (11)
	Text	6 (3)	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	8 (4)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q32. What communication medium are you more likely to use if you need a response by the end of the next working day?	Email	35 (18)	29 (15)	8 (4)	10 (5)	82 (42)
	Talk	4 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (2)	8 (4)
	Text	6 (3)	4 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	10 (5)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q33. What communication medium are you more likely / to use if you need a response within 48 hours?	Email	39 (20)	33 (17)	8 (4)	10 (5)	90 (46)
	Talk	4 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (2)	8 (4)
	Text	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)
Q34. What communication medium are you more likely / to use when response time is not critical?	Email	37 (19)	33 (17)	8 (4)	10 (5)	88 (45)
	Talk	4 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1)	6 (3)
	Text	4 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1)	6 (3)
	Total	45 (23)	33 (17)	8 (4)	14 (7)	100 (51)

response time is one to three hours and/or four hours to by the end of day also bears some discussion. The results might suggest that companies should define the term “immediate.” Some CM’s might view the term “immediate” as any response needed before the close of the business day. Thus, if companies believe that inefficiencies might happen as a result of potential electronic communication “swaps” that might render matters from being resolved or negate time for the matter’s resolution to be implemented the same day, then those companies should specify face to face communication as the medium to use if they deem it more appropriate for their operations.

Additionally, generational differences might be a factor in the results. Respondents in the less than 5 year experience group might have views and expectations associated with the term “immediate” that are different from ones held by their older generational counterparts. Growing up “multi-tasking,” with text messaging and other CMC devices in their hands and/or at their disposal while performing other tasks, is a characteristic of persons in the less than 5 years experience group. Since nearly instant response to texts/emails is seen as a characteristic of this group, the term “immediate,” quite possibly, has taken on another cultural meaning for persons in this category. It’s possible that the term might indicate an expectation, based on CMC use, that responses originated by this medium will be answered quickly. Educators see this expectation from today’s students who contact them by email. Follow-up emails can arrive from students shortly after arrival of the original email if it has not been answered within a time

frame deemed acceptable by the student. To mitigate differences in generational cultural expectations, companies should ensure that all CM's understand the protocols in place to negate performance inefficiencies resulting from varied expectations (i.e., email/text will always be answered quickly/timely). Researchers on the topic of expectations of CMC use and expected availability of contact note that availability anywhere, and at anytime, seems to transform into availability everywhere and all the time (Brown, et al., 2001; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Derks & Bakker, 2010). Researchers also note that speed-oriented communication (i.e., CMC) gives users a sense that the recipient can be reached and dealt with quickly (Manger, et al., 2003; Derks & Bakker, 2010). This might be true of those in the less than five years experience group, which is the group most heavily influenced by the proliferation of held mobile devices and increased text message usage due to flat rate pricing plans.

Companies should also be aware of the impact that electronic communication style and content can have on communication inefficiencies, especially in short response time circumstances. Derks and Bakker note that the "how things are said part" is regularly missing in electronic communication, and missing that element is not without negative consequences (Derks and Baaker, 2010). They note that the element can lead to miscommunication, particularly arising from the sender's inability to uncover miscommunication which has occurred prior to sending messages. Derks and Bakker go on to note that misunderstandings occur because the sender thinks the message is clear, but the receiver does not interpret the message in the manner that the sender meant it. This happens, they point out, because (1) in interpreting how the receiver will receive the message, we take ourselves as the main reference point, and (2) all senders think they are good/competent at sending electronic messages. Hence, when disconnects due to miscommunication occur in instances when response time is short, inefficiencies can occur. The survey respondents indicate email increases as the preferred choice of medium for response times greater than "immediate." Email as the preference rises to 70% as the choice of respondents when a response is required between four hours and by the end of the day, a period which could be deemed by some as a short response time. Hence, companies might also do well to implement protocols that either measure or ensure the effectiveness of electronic communication (i.e., reduce miscommunication) by their employees, especially when the time response might be deemed "critical" (a term companies should also define when developing communications protocols).

Communication Medium vs. Documentation

Table 4 presents abbreviated results of questions posed to measure respondents thoughts on their choice of communication medium for project documentation. A Lickert scale was used for this series of questions, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree ... 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly Agree. Overall, results indicate that respondents agreed moderately or strongly (mean = 6.5) that email provided instant and well documented records of project related discussions and agreements. Relative scatter, as indicated by standard deviation, is measured at 0.74 overall. While the results indicate that some agreement exists that text messaging can also be used for project documentation, the agreement is not as strong (overall mean = 4.0) as it is for email, nor is the degree of consensus, as indicated by standard deviation (2.0), as much as it is for email. There is also less agreement and consensus indicated on the use of electronic communication vs. personal communication for project related discussions due to potential time saving resulting from not requiring follow up documentation of discussions and decisions. This suggests that some respondents believe formal documentation is necessary in some instances. Email gets a higher overall approval (overall mean = 4.0, std. dev = 1.53) for this question. Note that text messaging is viewed negatively as an effective documentation method by the 5 to 15 year and 15 to 25 year experience groups. Guz notes "courts and regulators have made it clear that employers may be held liable for what employees do with company [owned] computers and systems" (Guz, 2010). Hence, email and text message discussions, decisions, and documentation can be afforded the same legal scrutiny as documents and records generated by other and more formal means.

Summary and Conclusions

Results of the survey appear to suggest that some generational differences with respect to communication mediums and protocol expectations might exist between today's younger generation of construction managers and their more experienced counterparts. The limited survey results presented in this paper suggest that differences might exist

Table 4

<i>Communication Medium vs. Documentation</i>					
Question No. Mean (bold) and Std Dev (italics) Lickert Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree	< 5 years	5 - 15 years	15 - 25 years	> 25 years	Overall Mean & Std Dev
Q41. Emails provide instant and well documented records of project related discussions and agreements	6.7 <i>0.65</i>	6.3 <i>1.08</i>	6.2 <i>0.58</i>	6.5 <i>0.55</i>	6.5 <i>0.74</i>
Q42. Text messages provide instant and well documented records of project related discussions and agreements	4.0 <i>2.13</i>	3.5 <i>2.15</i>	3.3 <i>2.31</i>	4.3 <i>1.97</i>	4.0 <i>2.03</i>
Q45. Time spent documenting project related personal communications discussion and agreements can be circumvented if email is used for resolving project issues	5.8 <i>0.92</i>	5.5 <i>1.69</i>	5.7 <i>2.08</i>	4.5 <i>1.64</i>	5.3 <i>1.53</i>
Q46. Time spent documenting project related personal communications discussion and agreements can be circumvented if text messaging is used for resolving project issues	3.6 <i>1.50</i>	2.3 <i>1.57</i>	1.8 <i>0.58</i>	3.8 <i>1.33</i>	3.1 <i>1.60</i>

with respect to employees perceptions of (1) formal written documentation vs. documentation provided by email and text messaging, and (2) response time norms and their meanings given today's communication technology and its availability. Although email, in conjunction with computer related technology in general, is acknowledged for its vastly positive contribution to communication in construction industry, it is subjected to clarity issues due to idiosyncrasies associated with communication nuance. As a result, inefficiencies can occur with the medium's use. The survey results also suggest that many construction companies do not have formal communication protocols in place. Given the litigious nature of today's construction industry, and its profit margins, companies should consider examining this issue to determine if potential areas of inefficiency already exist or could arise as a result of nonexistent or ineffective communication protocols, and also to ensure that those protocols in place are sufficient to protect the company.

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Appendix

<i>Business Operations and Communication Mediums Impacts</i>		
	Telephone/Personal Contact	Email/Text/CMC
(1) Making Arrangements That Require Negotiations or Resolving a Simple Issue	Can be done in a few phone calls. It's immediate. Once we are talking with someone, we can resolve situations immediately.	Hours, even days (worse-case scenario) can be spent swapping emails to resolve matters or make the arrangements. There's no need to send a message and wait hours before getting a response.
(2) Opportunity For Give and Take During Negotiations/ Discussions	Provides instant opportunities for give and take.	Although electronic messaging can give the appearance of the give and take in a conversation, it cannot possibly convey the shadings and meanings that voices can.
(3) Message/ Response	If pre-thought has not been given to the topic or agenda, personal contact can provide spontaneity and honest reaction. These can be critical when establishing points of view.	Allows careful crafting of answers and time to think out responses. This can allow for some untruths and can be documented by the other party. Care should be taken with email/texts. They may be helpful or harmful.
(4) Proper Tone	Much can be acquired from the tone of the conversation. Stress, lying, happy, disappointed and so on. It is more spontaneous and honest. The telephone is so immediate, hence, the luxury of waiting and carefully composing the "correct" answer to inquiries might not avail itself. The opportunity to hear spontaneity or hear that catch in the voice while an answer is calculated is heard with the telephone.	Tone can't be readily conveyed and is sometimes misinterpreted.
(5) Records	Unless the conversation is recorded, follow-up written summaries of discussions/agreements must be generated.	Facilitates saving pertinent information as evidence, notes, and reminders for later.
(6) Contact/ Availability	Phone tag can occur or it might require scheduling a time to talk to someone.	Can write and send a message whenever it's convenient (to you), this may not be the case for the recipient.
(7) Understanding of Message	It's easier to discern a person's meaning. The voice is a powerful communication tool. It's powerful for the speaker as well as the listener. The speaker uses inflections, pauses, tones and shading to help convey their meaning. The listener is able to use the speaker's voice to help discern what isn't being said. While voices say words and meanings, good listeners are able to figure out if differences exist between the two.	Meanings can be misinterpreted especially when slang, abbreviations, and other non-business terms are used in message.