

“Protocols” Make E-mail More Effective. . . Fortunately!

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This is the second article in a two-part series that began with “E-mail Makes Everything More Efficient. . . Unfortunately!” In the first, we noted that analyses of e-mail use *all* conclude that, while e-mail has obvious advantages, it also has an extraordinary, if subtle, capacity to undermine social capital, the lifeblood of global accounts. We defined *social capital* as “the norms and social relationships embedded in social structures that enable people to coordinate action to achieve desired goals” (World Bank). In short, social capital makes the business world go ‘round!

True, e-mail may now be indispensable. Nevertheless, e-mail is merely a *transcript-to-transcript* communication, thus excluding about 70% of the information routinely “sent” and “received” when people are together face-to-face. In so doing, it eliminates the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) vocal and body-language cues that people use to communicate and conduct business, either by telephone or in person. The precious social capital that we build up as account managers can be destroyed by a single misperception. Our first article concluded by asking: *How can we be productive members of virtual teams while side-stepping e-mail’s dangers to social capital?*

The answer to this question lies in how we conceive of the fundamental purpose of e-mail. If we view it as by far the most important vehicle for communication among virtual team members, we deny ourselves the flexibility needed to avoid its pitfalls. So instead, we recommend viewing e-mail as being *one* important method for virtual team communication that, *by itself*, usually is inadequate to attain optimal comprehension, collaboration, and commitment. E-mail must be supplemented with voice-to-voice and face-to-face conversations.

Three Possible Modes of Communication

For the purpose of this article, let's assume that, here at the beginning of the 21st century, there are three basic modes of human communication:

- (1) **face-to-face:** *all* channels of human communication are open so that subtly nuanced clues are available, potentially, for interpretation by each participant's emotional intelligence;
- (2) **voice-to-voice:** the *verbal* (in effect, transcript-to-transcript) and *vocal* channels are open so that *some* of the subtly nuanced clues are potentially available for interpretation; and
- (3) **transcript-to-transcript:** only the *verbal* channel is open, with the result that virtually none of the subtly nuanced clues are available for interpretation. We are concerned here with e-mails, but typed faxes and letters (in the "post," remember?) qualify as well.

We distinguish between *vocal* and *verbal*. "Vocal" pertains to the voice and comprises the many characteristics of voices (softness, tenseness, etc.) that, *without reference to words*, convey meanings. "Verbal" pertains exclusively and narrowly to spoken or written words: the transcript.

As global business people, we constantly need to communicate with others at a distance. Our challenge is to pause briefly, situation by situation, in order to make judicious choices among these three modes. Certainly, the personal characteristics of the involved individual(s) can affect our choices. For now, however, we'd like to set aside personal differences and focus instead on the characteristics of the overall situation and the message itself. That may sound like work, but we are about to show you how to make it efficient and effective work.

Factors Affecting the Choice of Communication Mode

Two factors need to be taken into account when making a judicious choice in any given communication situation.

- (1) **The importance of social presence.** The questions are: To what extent would it be advantageous for this communication to have thoroughly human qualities such as warmth, urgency, confidentiality, liveliness, sincerity, gravity, lightheartedness, intimacy, and the

like? And would it be advantageous for the communication to be characterized by spontaneous, continuous, back-and-forth exchange of ideas? If you reply that concern for these things is not cost-effective, we reply that the second word in “cost-effective” is *effective*. Effectiveness in business is about effectiveness with human beings.

- (2) **The importance of information richness.** The questions are: To what extent would this communication be better understood if it included *many* information types such as words, numbers, charts, graphs, images, and audio (and even perhaps things perceived by taste, touch, or smell)? And – note that the following overlaps with “social presence” – would the communication be better understood if it were embedded in *contextual* communication including things available only environmentally, nonverbally, and/or in the social situation?

Here is a graph depicting the appropriateness of the different communication modes within the context of these two important factors:

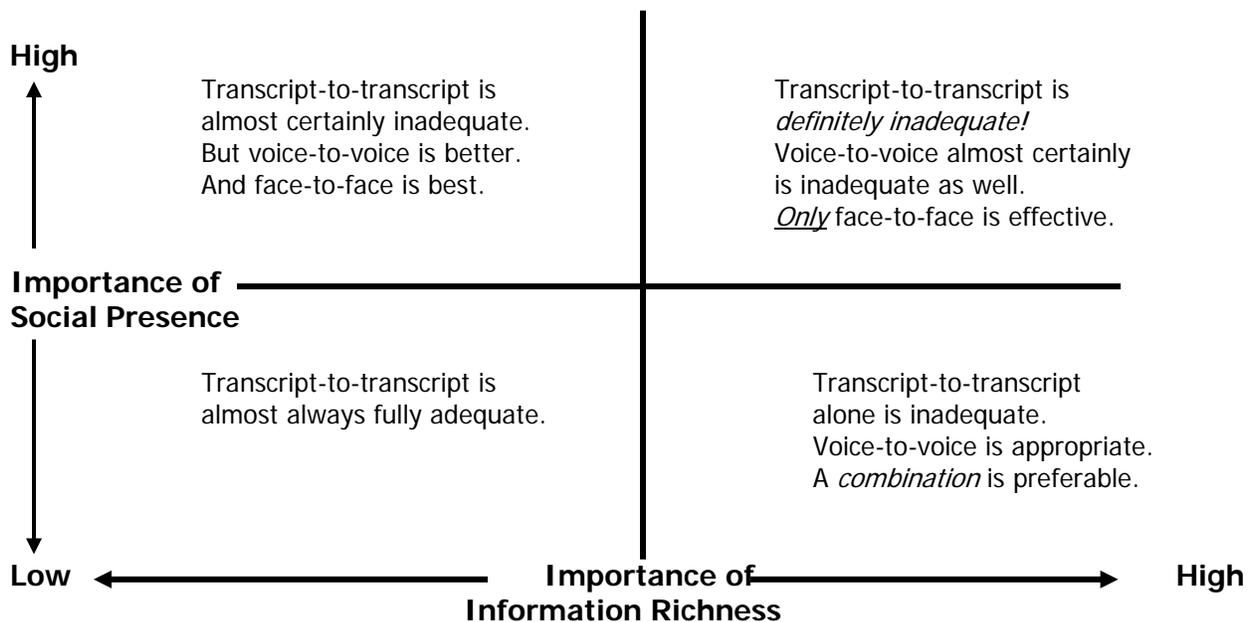


Figure 1. Communication Mode Considerations: Likely outcomes when the factors to consider are the importance of social presence and the importance of information richness.

Developing a Communications Protocol

We come finally to the development of a communications “protocol,” as promised in our title. We are using “protocol” as one possible word to designate a thoughtfully and *uniquely* developed set of written guidelines for a *specific* team’s use of transcript-to-transcript (e-mail, fax, etc.), voice-to-voice (telephone), and face-to-face communication modes. We italicize “unique” and “specific” here because we are convinced that the only way for a communications protocol to be effective is for it to be developed and periodically revised by the group that is actually using it. (We are not discussing videoconferences because the brevity of this article precludes a discussion of where, exactly, they belong on the continuum between voice-to-voice and face-to-face; available evidence is suggesting that videoconferencing is *not* the equivalent of face-to-face.)

- (1) **Identify the range of communication situations for your team.** These may include welcoming new members, generating ideas, transmitting data, laying plans, solving problems, persuading others, reaching decisions, receiving instructions, giving feedback, dealing with conflicts. . . . You probably have your own mental list by now!

- (2) **Match your communications situations to the matrix above.** Spend time with your team discussing how to attain optimal long-term results as you exchange information in each type of situation. (“Optimal long-term results” focuses not on momentary efficiency, but rather on team effectiveness and productivity.) How much social presence and information richness does each communication situation require?

- (3) **For each item, identify which mode(s) are preferable. . .and which are *not* allowable.** For each type of situation identified, determine which communication mode is indispensable (if any), which is adequate, and which should *never* be used. This requires your team to identify the intended optimal results, analyze the situations, and think through the processes.

Let’s take an easy example: *dealing with conflicts*. Most people realize that if you’re dealing with a conflict, especially an interpersonal one (rather than a technical one), it’s a very good idea to *not* use transcript-to-transcript and, if practical, to pass up voice-to-voice in favor of face-to-face.

Why? Because the ability to accurately read vocal and body language cues becomes extremely important in conflict situations; social presence and information richness are key.

Here's a more problematic example: *persuading others*. Persuade others *of what?* Are they insiders or outsiders? Is a price involved? What about the personalities, the corporate and national cultures involved? (Even when face-to-face, businesspeople can make damaging *faux pas* in cross-national encounters; this danger increases when some channels of communication are closed.) If the topic is new and the "others" are strangers, you may need social presence and thus try to arrange a face-to-face presentation. If the issue is complex, you may need information richness and thus try to arrange the use of multiple communication modes. For instance, you might plan to (1) begin by presenting facts via e-mail, (2) continue by learning about the other's needs and points of view via the telephone, and (3) work toward a final agreement face-to-face.

This is why, for most of the items on your list, you and your team-mates are the *only* ones who can assess the situations and arrive at conclusions about what communication modes are, and are not, appropriate. Many virtual teams have developed written communications protocols that, at a glance, enable them to select the best communications mode at any time. Once developed, protocols can be used efficiently, and can be quickly updated and improved.

Although this whole discussion is necessary because teamwork is no longer a face-to-face experience for global businesspeople, the fact is that, in *some* instances, transcript-to-transcript is actually better than face-to-face! Data analysis, for example, may be more efficiently and *objectively* completed when people are *not* face-to-face.

Virtual teams that take the time, near the beginning of their lives, to think these matters through *as a group*, and to prepare communication protocols for the use of e-mail and other modes of communication, are the ones that turn out to be more effective, more efficient, and more productive in the long run.

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