

# 1

## Professional Communication in a Digital, Social, Mobile World

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to

- 1 Explain the importance of effective communication to your career and to the companies where you will work.
- 2 Explain what it means to communicate as a professional in a business context.
- 3 Contrast the conventional communication process model with the social communication model.
- 4 Identify five major benefits of business communication technology and three major innovations that are reshaping the practice of communication.
- 5 Define *ethics*, explain the difference between an ethical dilemma and an ethical lapse, and list five guidelines for making ethical communication choices.
- 6 Identify six related skills that you will have the opportunity to develop as you work on your communication skills in this course.

### COMMUNICATION CLOSE-UP AT KLM

#### twitter.com/KLM

If you have ever served a customer, you know how challenging it can be to ensure that they have a positive experience with your company and will come back for more. Imagine, then, the challenge of handling thousands of comments and questions a day via multiple social media channels and in several key languages. This is exactly what KLM Royal Dutch Airlines' social media servicing department aims to do. More than that, it endeavors to check the specific details of individual customers and respond to them promptly and appropriately.

At the forefront of the airline industry in Europe, KLM is the oldest airline in the world to still be operating under its original name. KLM says that customers are at the heart of its business, and it prides itself on offering them innovative products and a safe, efficient, customer-centric experience.

The airline was one of the first to really get social media and understand the power of interacting with its customers. KLM Social Media started in 2009 as a tiny department that used Facebook and Twitter and posted photos of planes or messages about the occasional campaign. Events like the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in April 2010, whose ash clouds seriously disrupted air traffic in the region, introduced KLM to the broader potential of social media. In response to the eruption, KLM immediately provided a full social media service via Facebook and Twitter for passengers and their families.

The company soon became one of the first airlines to offer customers a 24/7 service in social media, especially on Twitter. In fact, KLM became the first airline ever to reschedule a passenger flight following a request from a user on that platform.

KLM now has one of the biggest social media service departments of any airline. KLM Royal Dutch Airlines' official Facebook page has over 14 million likes and offers personal service in 10 languages. The main Twitter account has 2.3 million followers, but each of its country accounts has a strong follower base as well. Social media agents are ready to interact 24/7 with the over two million travelers who follow the company across their various channels. These agents aim to answer questions on KLM products and services and resolve problems within 30 minutes. Naturally, customers are requested to share personal information only through private direct messages.

What's more, KLM was the first airline with a verified WhatsApp business account, and it is now also the first airline to



KLM is one of the first airlines to have really understood the power of interacting with its customers on social media.

Gaerthner/Alamy Stock Photo

offer a combination of human agents and artificial intelligence. In its hologram bars at airports in the Netherlands, passengers to Norway and Brazil can connect virtually with someone traveling to their destination and exchange travel and culture tips.

A core element of KLM's communication strategy is its aim to be the "leading airline in customer intimacy." Its social servicing department ensures that passengers receive a prompt, tailored

reply, not just a link through to other channels. The KLM app for smartphone, tablet, or smartwatch also gives customers direct access to KLM Customer Support. Customers can get all the travel information they need, book flights, and check in from their mobile device. As KLM innovates, its focus will be on complementing its one-to-many social media channels with one-to-few digital services in various applications.<sup>1</sup>



## Understanding Why Communication Matters

### 1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Explain the importance of effective communication to your career and to the companies where you will work.

*Communication* is the process of transferring information, meaning, and understanding between senders and receivers.

If you haven't read the Prologue yet, we encourage you to give it a quick read now. It will help you get the most out of your textbook, and it offers tips on using this course to plan a more successful and less stressful job search.

In every career path you can take—employee, independent freelancer, entrepreneur, manager—you will need strong communication skills.

Communication is complex, and KLM's ambitious social media program highlights its importance to every business (see the chapter-opening Communication Close-Up). **Communication** is the process of transferring information and meaning between senders and receivers, using one or more forms of media. For communication to be considered successful, it also must transfer or negotiate understanding.<sup>2</sup> As Figure 1.1 indicates, communication can happen in a variety of ways, including successful transfers of information and understanding, negotiations in which the sender and receiver arrive at an agreed-on meaning, and unsuccessful attempts in which the receiver assembles a different message than the one the sender intended.

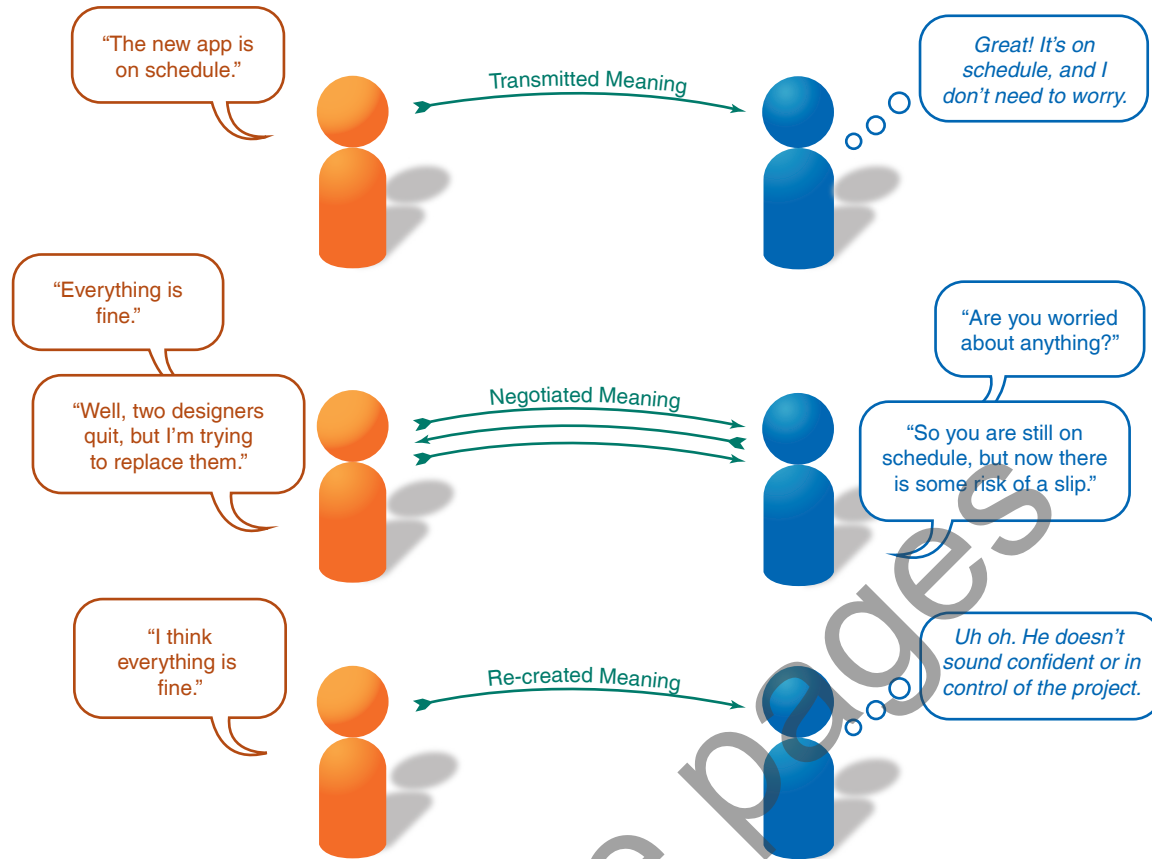
### COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT TO YOUR CAREER

You can have the greatest ideas in the world, but they usually aren't much good to your company or your career if you can't express them clearly and persuasively. Some jobs, such as sales and customer support roles, are primarily about communicating. In fields such as engineering or finance, you often need to share complex ideas with executives, customers, and colleagues, and your ability to connect with people outside your field can be as important as your technical expertise. If you have the entrepreneurial urge, you will need to communicate with a wide range of audiences—from investors, bankers, and government regulators to employees, customers, and business partners.

The changing nature of employment is putting new pressure on communication skills, too. Companies such as Uber and Lyft are the most visible in the *gig economy*, where independent contractors work without many of the advantages or disadvantages of regular employment. Many other companies now supplement their permanent workforces with independent contractors who are brought on for a short period or even just a single project. Chances are you could spend part of your career as one of these independent freelancers, working without the support network that an established company environment provides. If you take this path, you will need to "sell yourself" into each new contract, communicate successfully in a wide range of work situations, and take full responsibility for your career growth and success.

If you move into an executive role or launch your own company, you can expect communication to consume the majority of your time. Top executives spend most of their workdays communicating, and businesspeople who can't communicate well don't stand much chance of reaching the top.

No matter which route you follow, keep in mind that the world is full of good marketing strategists, good accountants, good engineers, and good attorneys—but it is not full of good communicators. View this as an opportunity to stand out from your competition in the job market.



**Figure 1.1** Sharing Information and Understanding

These three exchanges between a software project manager (*left*) and his boss (*right*) illustrate the variety of ways in which information is shared between senders and receivers. In the top exchange, the sender's meaning is transmitted intact to the receiver, who accepts what the sender says at face value. In the middle exchange, the sender and receiver negotiate the meaning by discussing the situation. The negotiated meaning is that everything is fine so far, but the risk of a schedule slip is now higher than it was before. In the bottom exchange, the receiver has a negative emotional reaction to the word *think* and as a result creates her own meaning—which is that everything probably is not fine despite what the sender says.

## COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT TO YOUR COMPANY

Aside from the personal benefits, communication should be important to you because it is important to your company in three essential areas:

- **Operations.** Every company needs fast, effective communication between managers and staff, within departments, between departments, and between the company and its external business partners. Communication carries everything from high-level strategic plans down to minute technical details, and any bottlenecks or breakdowns can reduce operational efficiency and create problems with quality or safety.
- **Intelligence.** Companies need to keep a constant “ear to the ground” to be alerted to new opportunities, risks, and impending problems—both internally and externally.
- **Relationships.** Just as in personal and social relationships, business relationships depend on communication. Effective communication strengthens the connections between a company and all its **stakeholders**, which are any persons or organizations significantly affected by the company's business decisions and operations.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholder groups include employees, customers, investors, creditors, suppliers, and local communities. Individuals within companies also rely on communication to foster the emotional connections that create a healthy work environment.<sup>4</sup>

Companies rely on communication for efficient operations, timely business intelligence, and positive relationships.

*Stakeholders* are any persons or organizations significantly affected by a company's business decisions and operations.

Put simply, no business can function without effective communication, and the better the communication, the better every part of the company is likely to run.

Effective messages are *practical, factual, concise, clear,* and *persuasive*.

## WHAT MAKES BUSINESS COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVE?

To make your communication efforts as effective as possible, focus on making them *practical, factual, concise, clear,* and *persuasive*:

- **Provide practical information.** Give recipients useful information that helps them solve problems, pursue opportunities, or take other action.
- **Give facts rather than vague impressions.** Use concrete language, specific detail, and information that is clear, accurate, and ethical. When an opinion is called for, present compelling evidence to support your conclusion.
- **Communicate efficiently.** Concise messages show respect for people's time, and they increase the chances of a positive response.
- **Clarify expectations and responsibilities.** Craft messages to generate a specific response from readers. When appropriate, clearly state what you expect from audience members or what you can do for them.
- **Offer compelling arguments and recommendations.** When a situation calls for persuasive communication, show your readers how they will benefit if they respond the way you would like them to respond.

Keep these five important characteristics in mind as you compare the ineffective and effective versions of the message in Figure 1.2.

## Communicating as a Professional

### 2 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Explain what it means to communicate as a professional in a business context.

*Professionalism* is the quality of performing at a high level and conducting oneself with purpose and pride.

You've been communicating your entire life, of course, but if you don't have a lot of work experience yet, meeting the expectations of a professional environment might require some adjustment. A good place to start is to consider what it means to be a professional. **Professionalism** is the quality of performing at a high level and conducting oneself with purpose and pride. It means doing more than putting in the hours and collecting a paycheck: True professionals go beyond minimum expectations and commit to making meaningful contributions. Professionalism can be broken down into six distinct traits: striving to excel, being dependable and accountable, being a team player, demonstrating a sense of etiquette, maintaining a positive outlook, and making ethical decisions (see Figure 1.3 on page 48).

A key message to take from Figure 1.3 is how much these elements of professionalism depend on effective communication. For example, to be a team player, you must be able to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and interact with a wide variety of personalities. Without strong communication skills, you won't be able to perform to your potential, and others won't recognize you as the professional you'd like to be.

This section offers a brief look at the skills employers will expect you to have, the nature of communication in an organizational environment, and the importance of adopting an audience-centered approach.

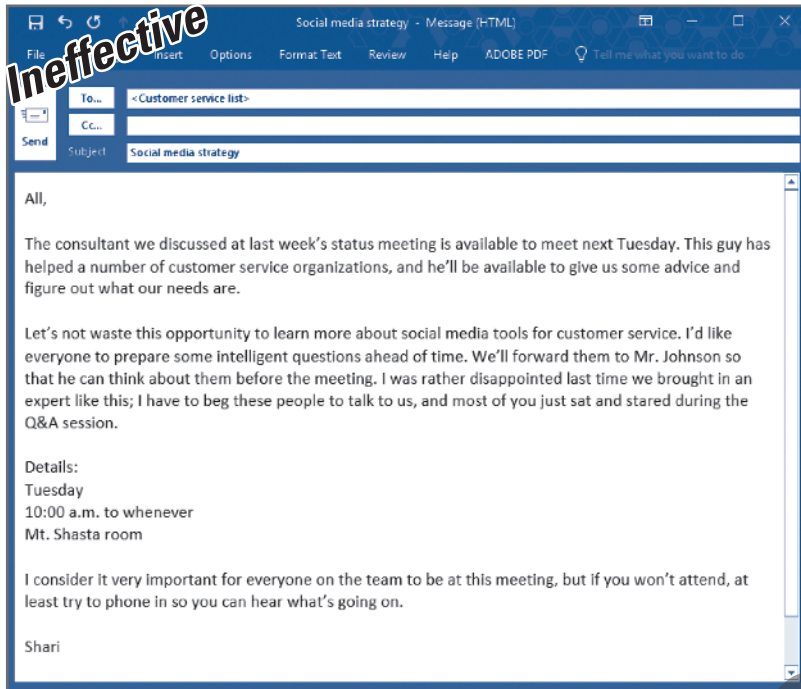
## UNDERSTANDING WHAT EMPLOYERS EXPECT FROM YOU

Employers expect you to possess a wide range of communication skills.

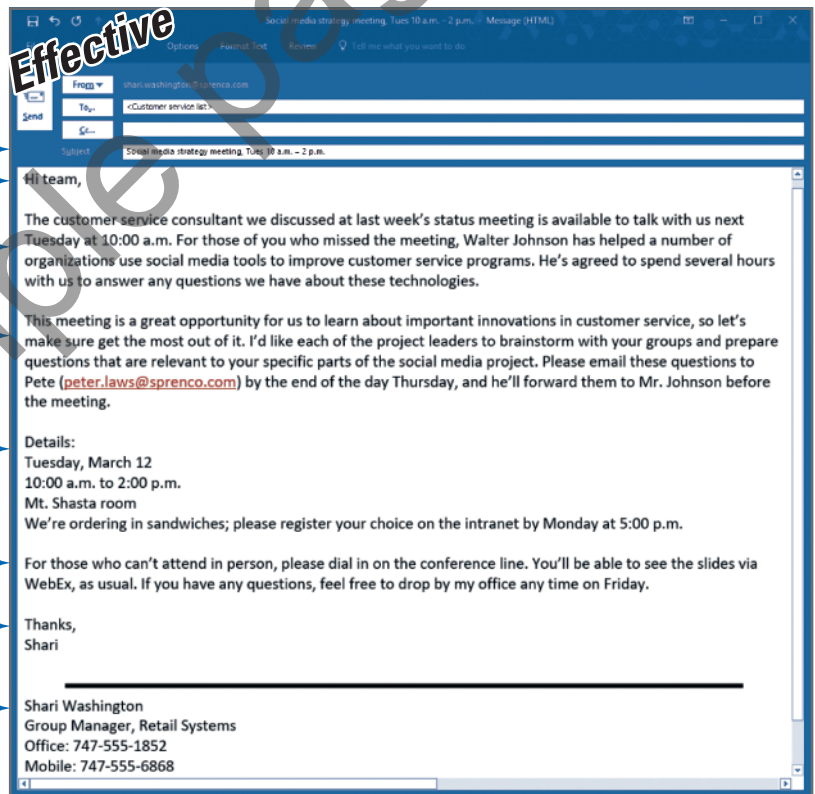
*Critical thinking* is the ability to evaluate evidence completely and objectively in order to form logical conclusions and make sound recommendations.

Today's employers expect you to be competent at a range of communication tasks that reflect the value of communication discussed on page 45:

- **Acquiring, processing, and sharing information.** Employers expect you to be able to recognize information needs, locate and evaluate reliable sources of information, organize information into cohesive messages, and use information ethically. This collection of skills is often referred to as *digital information fluency*.<sup>5</sup> Information fluency includes **critical thinking**, which is the ability to evaluate evidence completely and objectively in order to form logical conclusions and make sound recommendations.
- **Using communication to foster positive working relationships.** This task includes listening, practicing good etiquette, resolving conflicts respectfully, and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds.



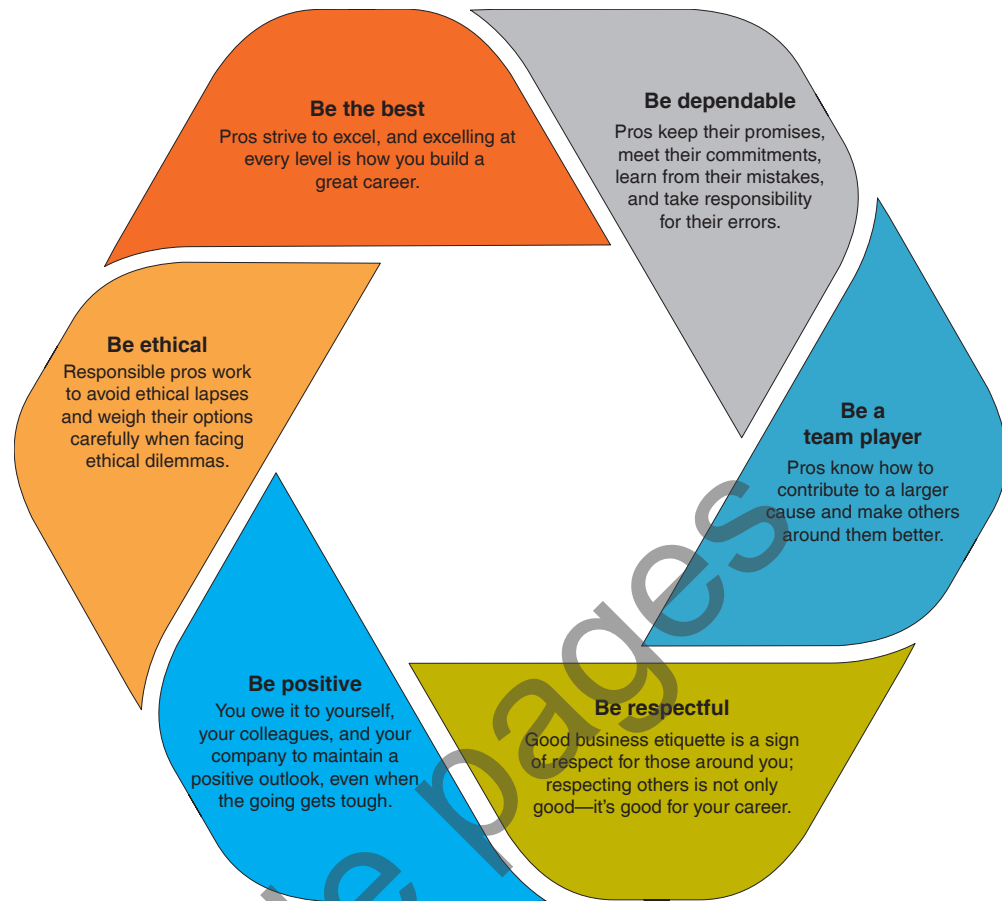
- (a) The vague subject line fails to alert people to the upcoming meeting.
- (b) The greeting is cold and off-putting.
- (c) The opening paragraph fails to provide necessary background information for anyone who missed the meeting.
- (d) A negative, accusatory tone puts readers on the defensive, and the request for action fails to clarify who needs to do what by when.
- (e) The meeting information includes the day, but not the date, which could lead to confusion.
- (f) The wording here assumes that people who won't attend don't want to, which might not be true. The writer also fails to invite questions ahead of the meeting.
- (g) The lack of a closing (such as "Thank you") contributes to the harsh, abrupt tone.
- (h) The writer fails to provide alternative contact information or invite questions about the meeting.



- (a) An informative subject line helps people grasp important details immediately.
- (b) The greeting is friendly without being too casual.
- (c) The opening paragraph fills in missing information so that everyone can grasp the importance of the message.
- (d) This upbeat paragraph emphasizes the positive value of the meeting, and the request provides enough information to enable readers to respond.
- (e) The date eliminates scheduling uncertainty.
- (f) The writer offers everyone a chance to participate, without making anyone feel guilty about not being able to attend in person. The closing paragraph invites questions ahead of time so they don't derail the meeting.
- (g) Like the greeting, the close has a warm and personal tone, without being too casual.
- (h) The email signature provides additional information and alternative contact options.

**Figure 1.2 Effective Professional Communication**

At first glance, the first email message looks like a reasonable attempt at communicating with the members of a project team. However, review the blue annotations to see just how many problems the message really has.



**Figure 1.3 Elements of Professionalism**  
To be respected as a true professional, develop these six qualities.

- **Representing your employer in the public arena.** Employers expect you to act responsibly and professionally on social media and in other venues and to follow accepted standards of grammar, spelling, and other aspects of quality writing and speaking.
- **Efficiently using the tools that your employer provides.** Aside from in-person conversations and meetings, every instance of business communication involves some level of technological assistance, so employers expect a level of proficiency with the tools they provide you to use.

You'll have the opportunity to practice these skills throughout this course, but don't stop there. Successful professionals continue to hone communication skills throughout their careers.

## COMMUNICATING IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

In addition to having the proper skills, you need to learn how to apply those skills in the business environment, which can be quite different from the social and scholastic environments you are accustomed to. Every organization has a **formal communication network**, in which ideas and information flow along the lines of command (the hierarchical levels) in the company's organization structure (see Figure 1.4).

Throughout the formal network, information flows in four directions. *Downward communication* flows from top executives to middle managers to frontline employees, conveying executive decisions and providing information that helps employees do their jobs. *Upward communication* flows in the opposite direction, from employees to middle managers to top executives, giving those at high levels insight into problems, trends, opportunities, grievances, and performance. *Horizontal* or *lateral communication* flows between departments to help employees share information, coordinate tasks, and solve

### MOBILE APP

**Pocket** collects online content you'd like to read or view later and syncs it across your mobile devices.

The *formal communication network* mirrors the company's organizational structure.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS NOW

### Practice Your Professionalism

Don't wait until you're on the job to develop your professionalism. College gives you many opportunities to hone your approach to work. The sooner you can get in sync with the professional work environment, the sooner you are likely to succeed in your first job and position yourself for a promotion. If you are already working or have worked in a business setting, think about the ways you could make an even stronger impression and fine-tune your skills.

Here are three opportunities to pursue now:

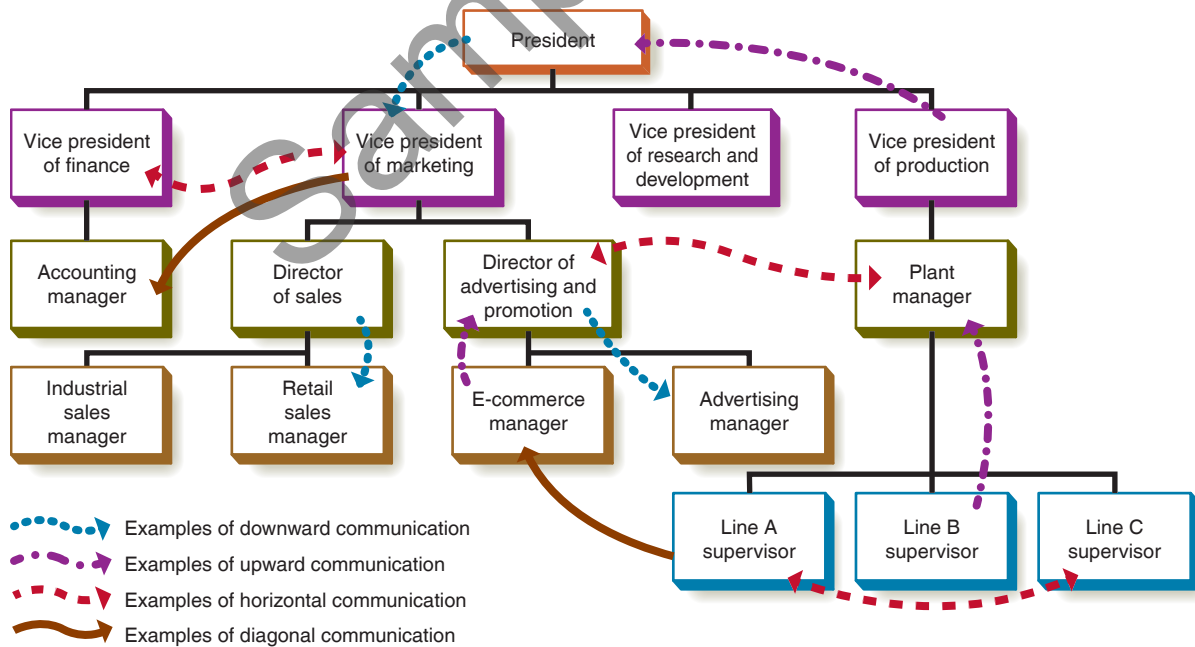
- **Communication with your instructors.** If you have ever started an email message to an instructor with “Yo, prof,” now would be a good time to up your game. Imagine you are communicating with a high-level executive or someone else whose opinion of you will have a huge impact on your career advancement. You don't have to be stiff and overly formal; read the situation based on how each instructor communicates with you. Use a respectful greeting (ask your instructors how they would like to be greeted in person and in writing, if they haven't already told you), complete sentences, and standard punctuation.
- **The quality of your work.** Everything you produce reflects your commitment to quality, in both substance and

presentation. Get in the habit of doing your best work now, and it will be second nature by the time you're getting paid to do it.

- **Scheduling and commitments.** Missing deadlines on the job can mean missing major career opportunities. Meeting your commitments requires the ability to estimate how long things will take (which comes with practice and careful planning) and the mental strength to power through the tough parts of a project. See “Think Now, Write Later” on page 187 for advice on how to prevent last-minute surprises when you're staring down a deadline.

### COACH YOURSELF

1. How would you rate the quality of your interactions with your instructors? What could you do to improve communication?
2. Do you feel awkward when communicating at a more formal level than you are accustomed to in your personal or social life? What steps can you take to get comfortable with “professional-grade” communication before you graduate?



**Figure 1.4 Formal Communication Network**

The formal communication network is defined by the relationships between the various job positions in the organization. Messages can flow upward (from a lower-level employee to a higher-level employee), downward (from a higher-level employee to a lower-level employee), horizontally (across the organization, between employees at the same or similar levels), or diagonally (across departments and upward or downward).

The *informal communication network* encompasses all communication that occurs outside the formal network.

complex problems. Finally, with *diagonal communication*, information crosses department lines while moving up or down.<sup>6</sup> When problems and opportunities span multiple departments, horizontal and diagonal flows can help ensure that communication doesn't get stifled moving up and down the vertical lines in the organization chart.<sup>7</sup>

Every organization also has an **informal communication network**, which encompasses all communication that occurs outside of formal channels. Some of this informal communication takes place naturally when employees interact on the job and in social settings, and some of it takes place when the formal network doesn't provide information that employees want. In fact, the limitations of formal communication networks helped spur the business use of social media. Communication in the informal network is healthy and important because the formal network can't always capture and share all the information that helps people do their jobs. However, if a workplace is rife with rumors and gossip, this situation could be a sign that the formal network is not functioning effectively.

### ADOPTING AN AUDIENCE-CENTERED APPROACH

The *audience-centered approach* involves understanding, respecting, and meeting the needs of your audience members; it is also known as adopting the “you” attitude.

An **audience-centered approach** involves understanding and respecting the members of your audience and making every effort to get your message across in a way that is meaningful to them. This approach is also known as adopting the “you” attitude, where “you” is the person receiving the message, in contrast to messages that are about “me” as the sender. Learn as much as possible about the beliefs, education, status, communication style, and personal and professional concerns of your readers and listeners. If you're addressing people you don't know and you're unable to find out more about them, try to project yourself into their position by using common sense and imagination.

Relating to the needs of others is a key part of *emotional intelligence*, the ability to read other people's emotions accurately and to manage one's own emotions in productive ways.<sup>8</sup> The more you know about the people you're communicating with, the easier it will be to focus on their needs—which, in turn, will make it easier for them to hear your message, understand it, and respond positively. A vital element of audience-centered communication is professional etiquette, which you'll study in Chapter 2.

## Exploring the Communication Process

### 3 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Contrast the conventional communication process model with the social communication model.

You know from your own experience that even with the best intentions, communication efforts can fail. Messages can get lost or ignored. The receiver of a message can interpret it in ways the sender never imagined. Two people receiving the same information can reach different conclusions about what it means.

Fortunately, by understanding communication as a process with distinct steps, you can improve the odds that your messages will reach their intended audiences and produce their intended effects. This section explores the communication process in two stages: first by following a message from one sender to one receiver in the conventional communication model and then by expanding on that approach with multiple messages and participants in the social communication model. (A note on terminology: Throughout the book, *message* is used in both the general sense of “a bundle of information,” regardless of form, and the specific sense of instant messages or other brief message formats.)

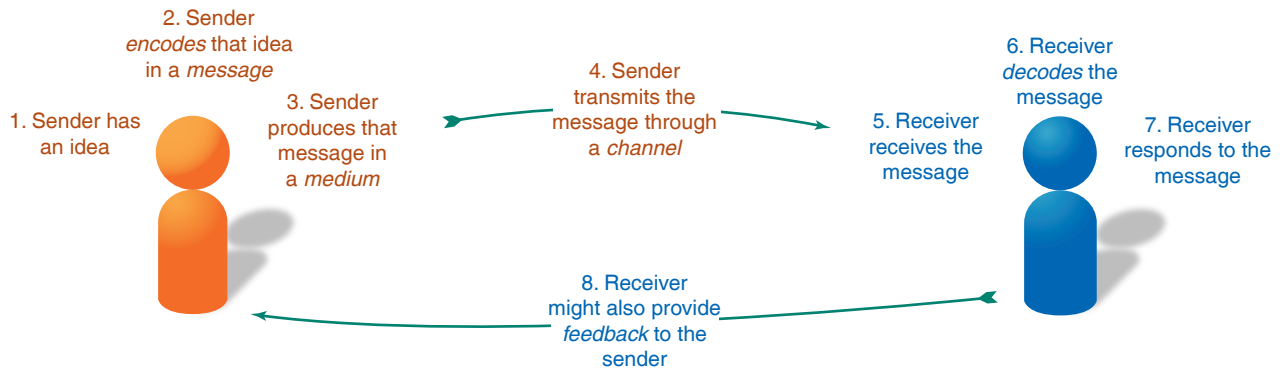
Viewing communication as a process helps you identify steps you can take to improve your success as a communicator.

### THE CONVENTIONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

By viewing communication as a process (Figure 1.5), you can identify and improve the skills you need to be more successful. Many variations on this process model exist, but these eight steps provide a practical overview:

1. **The sender has an idea.** Whether a communication effort will ultimately be effective starts right here and depends on the nature of the idea and the motivation for sending it. For example, if your motivation is to solve a problem, you have a better chance of crafting a meaningful message than if your motivation is merely to complain.





**Figure 1.5 The Conventional Communication Process**

This eight-step model is a simplified view of one cycle of communication. In reality, the process is complicated with noise, barriers, and interruptions, but understanding the basic concepts of encoding and decoding will help you as a sender and as a receiver.

2. **The sender encodes the idea as a message.** When someone puts an idea into a **message**—which you can think of as the “container” for an idea—he or she is **encoding** it, or expressing it in words or images. Much of the focus of this course is on developing the skills needed to encode your ideas into effective messages.
3. **The sender produces the message in a transmittable medium.** With the appropriate message to express an idea, the sender now needs a **communication medium** to present that message to the intended audience. Media can be divided into oral (spoken), written, or visual formats.
4. **The sender transmits the message through a channel.** Technology continues to increase the number of **communication channels** you can use to transmit your messages. The distinction between medium and channel can get a bit murky, but think of the medium as the *form* a message takes (such as a written message) and the channel as the system used to *deliver* the message (such as Twitter or email). (Reflecting common usage and as a matter of convenience, this book occasionally uses the terms *digital media* and *social media* to refer to categories of channels that can transmit oral, written, and visual messages.)
5. **The audience receives the message.** If the channel functions properly, the message reaches its intended receivers in the target audience. However, mere arrival at the destination is no guarantee that the message will be noticed or understood correctly. As “How Audiences Receive Messages” (page 53) explains, many messages are either ignored or misinterpreted.
6. **The audience decodes the message.** After a message is received, the receiver needs to extract the idea from the message, a step known as **decoding**. “How Audiences Decode Messages” (pages 53–54) takes a closer look at this complex and subtle step in the process.
7. **The audience responds to the message.** By crafting messages in ways that show the benefits of responding, senders can increase the chances that recipients will respond in positive ways. However, as “How Audiences Respond to Messages” (page 54) points out, whether a receiver responds as the sender hopes depends on the receiver (a) *remembering* the message long enough to act on it, (b) being *able* to act on it, and (c) being *motivated* to respond.
8. **The audience provides feedback to the sender.** In addition to responding (or not responding) to the message, audience members may give **feedback** that helps the sender evaluate the effectiveness of the communication effort. Feedback can be verbal (using written or spoken words), nonverbal (using gestures, facial expressions, or other signals), or both. Just like the original message, however, this feedback from the receiver also needs to be decoded carefully. A smile, for example, can have many meanings.

When senders *encode* ideas into *messages*, they express those ideas in words or images.

The *communication medium* is the form a message takes; the *communication channel* is the system used to deliver the message.

When receivers *decode* messages, they extract meaning from the words or images they’ve received.

*Feedback* is a reaction from the receiver back to the original sender that can offer clues about how successful the original message was.

Keep in mind that this description captures only one cycle of the communication process. A conversational exchange (in person, on the phone, or through a digital channel)

could include dozens of these cycles before the sender and the receiver achieve a satisfactory transfer of information and understanding.

Considering the complexity of this process—and the barriers and distractions that often stand between sender and receiver—it should come as no surprise that communication efforts often fail to achieve their objective. Fortunately, the better you understand the process, the more successful you'll be.

The following sections take a closer look at two important aspects of the process: environmental barriers that can block or distort messages and the steps audiences take to receive, decode, and respond to messages.

## BARRIERS IN THE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

Within any communication environment, messages can be disrupted by a variety of **communication barriers**. These barriers include noise and distractions, competing messages, filters, and channel breakdowns:

- **Noise and distractions.** External distractions range from uncomfortable meeting rooms to reminders popping up on your screen while you're trying to write or read. Internal distractions are thoughts and emotions that prevent audiences from focusing on incoming messages. The common habit of *multitasking*—attempting more than one task at a time—is practically guaranteed to create barriers when communication is involved because the human brain simply isn't wired to work that way. You may think you are doing two or more tasks at once, but you are really shifting back and forth between individual tasks, and your productivity and focus can suffer every time you shift.<sup>9</sup> As more communication takes place on mobile devices in busy environments, the need to insulate yourself from noise and distractions will keep growing.
- **Competing messages.** Having your audience's undivided attention is a rare luxury. In most cases, you must compete with other messages that are trying to reach your audience at the same time.
- **Filters.** Messages can be blocked or distorted by *filters*, which are any human or technological interventions between the sender and the receiver. Filtering can be intentional (such as automatically filing incoming email messages based on sender or content) or unintentional (such as an overly aggressive spam filter that traps legitimate emails). The structure and culture of an organization can also inhibit the flow of vital messages. And, in some cases, the people or companies you rely on to deliver a message can distort it or filter it to meet their own needs.
- **Channel breakdowns.** Sometimes the channel simply fails to deliver your message at all. A colleague you were counting on to forward a message to your boss might have forgotten to do so, for instance.

Everyone in an organization can help minimize barriers and distractions. When preparing messages, be aware of any barriers that could prevent those messages from reaching their intended audiences. If you move into management, keep an eye out for any organizational barriers that could be inhibiting the flow of information. In any situation, a small dose of common sense and courtesy goes a long way. Mute your phone before stepping into meetings, don't talk across the tops of other people's cubicles, and don't play music at a level that can distract others.

Finally, take steps to insulate yourself from distractions. Don't let messages interrupt you every minute of the day. Instead, set aside time to attend to messages all at once so that you can focus the rest of the time.

## INSIDE THE MIND OF YOUR AUDIENCE

After a message works its way through the communication channel and reaches the intended audience, it encounters a whole new set of challenges.

*Communication barriers* can block or distort messages before they reach the intended audience.

Minimizing barriers and distractions in the communication environment is everyone's responsibility.

## How Audiences Receive Messages

For an audience member to receive a message, three events need to occur: The receiver must *sense* the presence of a message, *select* it from all the other messages clamoring for attention, and *perceive* it as an actual message (as opposed to random, pointless noise).<sup>10</sup> You can appreciate the magnitude of this challenge by walking down any busy street in a commercial section of town. You will encounter hundreds of messages—billboards, posters, store window displays, car stereos, people talking, car horns, street signs, traffic lights, and so on. However, you will sense, select, and perceive only a fraction of these messages.

Today's business audiences are much like pedestrians on busy streets. They are inundated with so many messages and so much noise that they can miss or ignore many of the messages intended for them. One of the mind's defenses against this barrage is **selective attention**, which is focusing on a subset of the incoming stimuli or information sources and ignoring others.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, this focused attention can be helpful at times and harmful at others. If you are on your mobile phone trying hard to hear the other party, your mind will try to block out all the noise sources—one of which might be a car horn warning you to get out of the way.

Throughout this course, you will learn a variety of techniques to craft messages that get noticed. In general, follow these five principles to increase your chances of success:

- **Consider audience expectations.** Deliver messages using the media and channels that the audience expects. If colleagues expect meeting notices to be delivered by email, don't suddenly switch gears and start delivering the notices via blog posts without telling anyone. Of course, sometimes going *against* expectations can stimulate audience attention, which is why advertisers sometimes do wacky and creative things to get noticed. For most business communication efforts, however, following the expectations of your audience is the most efficient way to get your message across.
- **Make messages user-friendly.** Even if audiences are actively looking for your messages, they may not get the messages if you make them hard to find, hard to navigate, or hard to read.
- **Emphasize familiarity.** Use words, images, and designs that are familiar to your audience. For example, company websites usually put information about the company on a page called "About" or "About Us," so today's audiences expect to see such information on a page with this title.
- **Practice empathy.** Make sure your messages speak to the audience by clearly addressing *their* wants and needs—not just yours. This is the essence of the "you" attitude.
- **Design for compatibility.** Make sure your messages are compatible with the devices your audiences will use to read, listen to, or view them. For example, websites designed for full-size computer screens can be difficult to view on mobile devices, so contemporary web design emphasizes the need to support a wide variety of screen sizes and modes of interaction.

## How Audiences Decode Messages

A received message doesn't "mean" anything until the recipient decodes it and assigns meaning to it, and there is no guarantee the receiver will assign the same meaning that the sender intended. Assigning meaning through decoding is a highly personal process influenced by culture, individual experience, learning and thinking styles, ego, hopes, fears, beliefs, and even moods.

Our minds have a variety of self-defense mechanisms that protect our perceptions of the world and of ourselves, and they sometimes ignore, deny, or distort incoming information that threatens those views. If you have ever used the phrase "You only hear what you want to hear," you were referring to an example of this distorted perception. For

To truly receive a message, audience members need to sense it, select it, and then perceive it as a message.

*Selection attention* is focusing on a subset of incoming stimuli or messages while ignoring others; it can cause intended recipients to block out some or all of your message.

To improve the odds that your messages will be successfully perceived by your audience, pay close attention to expectations, ease of use, familiarity, empathy, and technical compatibility.

Decoding is a complex process; receivers often extract different meanings from messages than senders attempted to encode in their messages.

It's human nature to protect our views of the world and of ourselves, even to the extent of ignoring or distorting incoming information to fit our preconceived notions of reality.

example, if you ask four people to review a business plan that you believe is brilliant, and three of the appraisals come back positive, your ego will be tempted to reject the negative comments in the fourth review.

Differences in language and usage also influence received meaning. If you ask an employee to send you a report "as soon as possible," does that mean within 10 seconds, 10 minutes, or 10 days? By clarifying expectations and resolving potential ambiguities in your messages, you can minimize such uncertainties.

Individual thinking styles are another important factor in message decoding. For instance, someone who places a high value on objective analysis and clear logic might interpret a message differently than someone who values emotion or intuition (reaching conclusions without using rational processes).

In general, the more experiences you share with another person, the more likely you are to share your perceptions of the world and therefore arrive at the same meanings for a given message (see Figure 1.6). Careful audience analysis helps you understand how much of this overlap you have with your readers or listeners. The less shared experience you have with your audiences, the more background information and context you will need to provide in your messages.

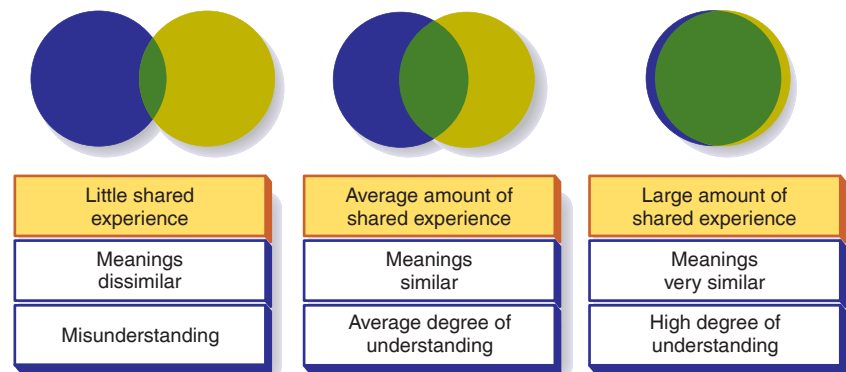
### How Audiences Respond to Messages

Let's assume your message has been delivered, received, and correctly decoded. Now what? Will audience members respond in the way you'd like them to? Only if three events occur.

First, the recipient must *remember* the message long enough to act on it. Simplifying greatly, memory works in several stages: *Sensory memory* momentarily captures incoming data from the senses, and then whatever sensory data the recipient pays attention to are transferred to *short-term memory*. Information survives in short-term memory for only a matter of seconds and will disappear or get crowded out by new information if it isn't transferred to *long-term memory*. This transfer can be done either actively (such as when a person memorizes a list of items) or passively (such as when a new piece of information connects with something else the recipient already has stored in long-term memory). Finally, the information needs to be *retrieved* when the recipient wants to act on it.<sup>12</sup> By communicating in ways that reflect the audience's wants and needs, you increase the chance that your messages will be remembered and retrieved.

Second, the recipient must to be *able* to respond as you wish. Obviously, if recipients simply cannot do what you want them to do, they will not respond according to your plan. By understanding your audience (you'll learn more about audience analysis in Chapter 4), you can minimize these unsuccessful outcomes.

Audiences will likely respond to a message if they remember it, if they're able to respond, and if they're properly motivated to respond.



**Figure 1.6** How Shared Experience Affects Understanding

The more two people or two groups of people share experiences—personal, professional, and cultural—the more likely it is that receivers will extract the intended meanings that senders encode into the messages.

Third, the recipient must be *motivated* to respond. You'll encounter many situations in which your audience has the option of responding but isn't required to. For instance, a record company may or may not offer your band a contract, or your boss may or may not respond to your request for a raise. Throughout this course, you'll learn techniques for crafting messages that can help motivate readers to respond positively to your messages.

By explaining how audiences will benefit by responding positively to your messages, you'll increase their motivation to respond.

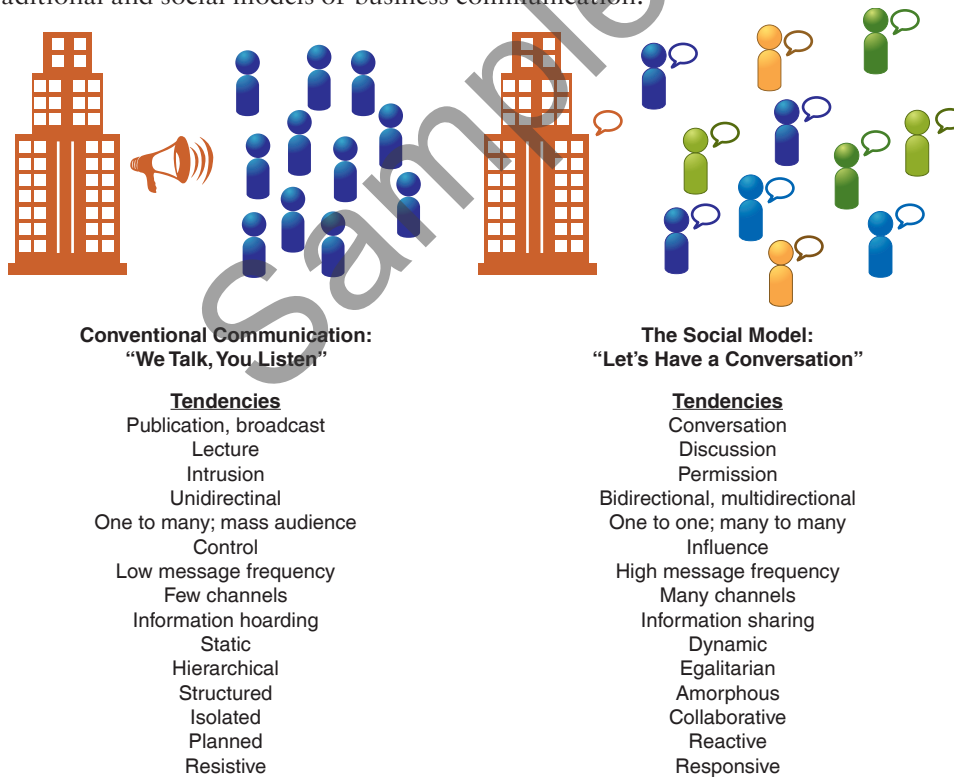
**THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION MODEL**

The conventional model presented in Figure 1.5 illustrates how a single idea moves from one sender to one receiver. In a larger sense, it also helps represent the traditional nature of business communication, which was primarily defined by a *publishing* or *broadcasting* mindset. Externally, a company issued carefully scripted messages to a mass audience that often had few options for responding to those messages or initiating conversations on their own. Customers and other interested parties had few ways to connect with one another to ask questions, share information, or offer support. Internally, communication tended to follow the same "we talk, you listen" model, with upper managers issuing directives to lower-level supervisors and employees.

However, in recent years, a variety of technologies have enabled and inspired a new approach to business communication. In contrast to the publishing mindset, this **social communication model** is interactive, conversational, and usually open to all who wish to participate. Audience members are no longer passive recipients of messages but active participants in a conversation. Social media have given customers and other stakeholders a voice they did not have in the past.

The *social communication model* is interactive, conversational, and usually open to all who wish to participate.

Instead of transmitting a fixed message, a sender in a social media environment initiates a conversation by asking a question or sharing valuable information. Information spread this way is often revised and reshaped by the participants as they forward it and comment on it. People can expand it, confirm it, amplify it, or refute it, depending on their needs and interests. Figure 1.7 lists some of the significant differences between the traditional and social models of business communication.



**Figure 1.7 The Social Communication Model**

The social communication model differs from conventional communication strategies and practices in a number of significant ways.

Social communication has two potential disadvantages for business: less control over messages and greater complexity.

The social communication model offers many advantages, but it has some disadvantages as well, starting with less control. People inside and outside a company have always been able to refute management statements or spread rumors, for example, but owners and managers could assert at least a degree of control because the options for everyone else were limited and often expensive. Now that more stakeholders have a say in the conversation via social media, they can use the megaphone power of the crowd to shape public perceptions in significant ways, such as arranging boycotts of companies whose policies they disagree with or influencing where and how companies advertise. Once a message gets out in the “wild,” it can be amplified, distorted, or misused in ways the original sender never envisioned.

A second potential disadvantage of the social model is complexity. Companies and individuals have access to more information than ever before, which is both positive and negative. On the negative side, there are more communication channels to monitor, more work is needed to separate valuable information from noise, there is a greater risk of the spread of false information, and there is a greater threat of information overload (see page 57).

## Using Technology to Improve Communication

Contemporary business communication is a technology-enabled activity, and your success as a communicator will depend on your comfort and skill with the tools you’ll have at your disposal. You are already using some of these tools, and you will be able to adapt your experience with various forms of digital and social media to workplace communication.

### THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Technology brings a wide variety of potential benefits to business communication, which can be grouped into five key areas:

- Making communication more effective by helping people craft messages that convey their ideas more clearly and persuasively
- Making communication more efficient by reducing the time and effort needed to create, transmit, and consume messages
- Improving research to help communicators discover, process, and apply information
- Assisting communicators with decision-making by guiding them through complex sets of data
- Removing communication barriers so more people can participate in the communication process more easily

You probably take advantage of many benefits provided by communication technology already, from spell checkers to search engines to a voice-input virtual assistant on a smartphone. Throughout this book, you’ll see examples of both simple and esoteric technologies that deliver these benefits, including in the special feature on pages 60–63, “Empowering Communicators with Intelligent Communication Technology.”

While technology can help communicators in some powerful ways, these benefits don’t come automatically. When tools are designed poorly or used inappropriately, they can hinder communication more than help. To use communication technology effectively, bear these five points in mind:

- **Keep technology in perspective.** Any technology is simply a tool, a means by which you can accomplish certain tasks. Technology is an aid to communication, not a replacement for it. Moreover, it can get in the way if not used thoughtfully. Throughout this book, you’ll see advice on keeping the focus on your messages and

#### 4 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Identify five major benefits of business communication technology and three major innovations that are reshaping the practice of communication.

The potential benefits of communication technology include

- Greater effectiveness
- Greater efficiency
- Better and easier research
- Improved decision-making
- Fewer barriers

#### MOBILE APP

**RescueTime** keeps track of how you spend your time and lets you know if you’re losing too much of your day to social media and other distractions.

your audiences and on using technology to enhance the communication process without overwhelming it.

- **Guard against information overload.** The overuse or misuse of communication technology can lead to **information overload**, in which people receive more information than they can effectively process. Information overload can cause distractions, stress, mistakes, and communication breakdowns, and minimizing it is a shared responsibility. As a receiver, be your own gatekeeper and stay mindful of what information you allow in. Periodically “prune” your information channels to avoid material you no longer need, and use filtering features in your systems to isolate high-priority messages that deserve your attention. As a sender, make sure you don’t send unnecessary messages or poorly crafted messages that require multiple rounds of clarification.
- **Use your tools wisely.** Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other communication technologies are key parts of what has been called the *information technology paradox*, in which information tools can waste as much time as they save. In addition to distracting employees from work responsibilities, inappropriate use can also leave companies vulnerable to lawsuits and security breaches.
- **Use your tools efficiently.** Knowing how to use your tools efficiently can make a big difference in your productivity. You don’t have to become an expert in most cases, but you do need to be familiar with the basic features and functions of the tools you are expected to use on the job. As a manager, make sure your employees are trained to use the systems you expect them to use.
- **Reconnect with people.** Even when it is working well, communication technology can still present barriers to understanding and healthy emotional connections. Messaging, email, and other text-heavy modes are particularly prone to misunderstandings and bruised feelings because they can’t convey nuances and emotions the same way that voice, video, and in-person conversation can. Whenever you sense that you’re stuck in a loop of confusion or negativity, pick up the phone or visit the other party in person if you can. A few minutes of direct conversation can often work wonders.

*Information overload* occurs when people receive more information than they can effectively process.

## THE SPECTRUM OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

This section offers a look at three sets of technology that you will encounter in your job search and in the workplace: social and workgroup communication systems, mobile communication, and intelligent communication technologies.

### Social and Workgroup Communication Systems

One of the most distinguishing features of business communication these days is how connected everyone and everything is. Businesses have had access to digital networking for decades, and many were quick to adopt social networking concepts when Facebook and similar networks took off.

**Social media** are digital platforms that empower stakeholders as participants in the communication process by allowing them to share content, revise content, respond to content, or contribute new content. Millions of companies now use public networks such as Facebook and Twitter to connect with customers, and many also have private, internal social networks that are restricted to employees and selected business partners. These private systems are often enhanced with shared file access, group messaging, and real-time collaboration capabilities for brainstorming, reviewing and revising documents, and virtual meetings. If you use social media now, you have a basic familiarity with how many of these systems work. You can read more about collaboration systems in Chapter 2 and business uses of social networking in Chapter 8.

*Social media* empower stakeholders as participants in the communication process by allowing them to share content, revise content, respond to content, or contribute new content.

### Mobile Communication

While social media tools are freeing communication from the constraints of closed networks, mobile connectivity is freeing it from the constraints of fixed locations. With mobile devices everywhere you look these days, it probably comes as no surprise that mobile

Mobile technology has become an essential part of the digital workplace.

Reading and writing are generally more difficult and prone to errors on smaller mobile screens.

Mobile technology alters the way people live and work, which requires communicators to modify their approach.

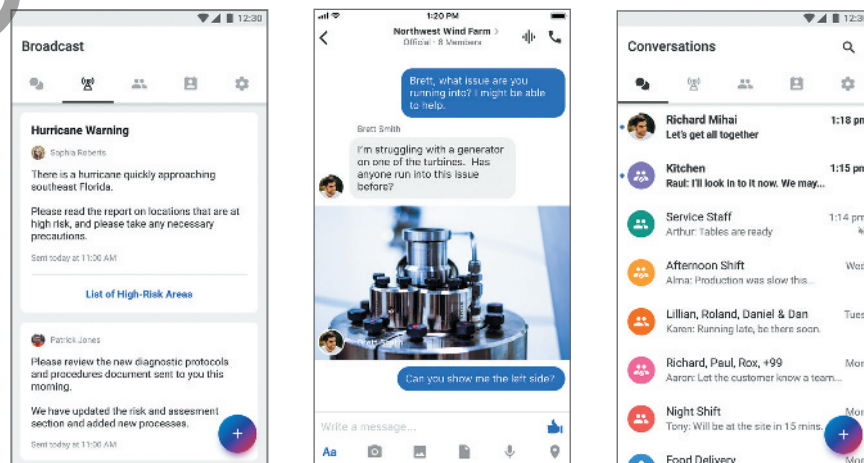
media consumption has skyrocketed in recent years; more than half of all internet access now occurs via mobile devices.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, this shift isn't just about consumer usage and entertainment. For a growing number of companies, mobile technology has become an essential part of the digital workplace. Mobile connectivity can give workers and companies greater flexibility, enhance productivity and collaboration, and create more-engaging experiences for customers and other users. And rather than being an accessory to or an extension of a traditional work computer, in many cases mobile devices are the primary interface that connects employees to the company's information networks.<sup>14</sup>

Business mobile communication involves many of the same communication tools that you may use now for messaging, social networking, researching, and writing. In addition, thousands of business-focused apps assist users with everything from presentations to project management to financial reporting. Many of these apps are either communication focused or have significant communication features, all designed to help employees stay connected no matter where their work takes them (see Figure 1.8). For example, with Rockwell Automation's FactoryTalk TeamONE app, teams can collaborate to diagnose problems on a production line using the app's measurement capabilities to acquire data from machinery and then using its communication tools in the troubleshooting process.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of mobile communication has some obvious implications, starting with the challenges of writing and reading on small screens. Documents that are easy to read on paper or on large screens can become quite difficult to read on a smartphone—and the more difficult the reading experience, the more likely that readers will misinterpret the message or simply stop reading. The trend toward larger phones (sometimes known as *phablets* because they fall somewhere between the size of conventional smartphones and tablets<sup>16</sup>) offers some relief, but even these devices present challenges for reading and writing.

Moreover, device size and portability are only the most obvious differences. Just as with social media, the changes brought about by mobile communication go far deeper than the technology itself. Mobile connectivity and computing alter the way people live and work, which requires communicators to modify their approach to writing and designing messages. For example, smartphones have become truly personal devices in ways that personal computers never did. For many users, the connection is so intense they may feel a sense of panic when they don't have frequent access to their phones.<sup>17</sup> When people are closely attached to their phones, day and night, they are more closely connected to all the information sources, conversations, and networks that those phones can reach. As a result, mobile communication can start to resemble a continuous stream of conversations that never quite end, which influences the way businesses need to interact with their stakeholders.



**Figure 1.8** Mobile Communication Tools

Mobile technologies offer multiple ways to improve communication and other key business processes. To meet the needs of *deskless* workers, for example, this system from Zinc unifies everything from training materials to group messaging in a single app so that everyone in a company has instant access to information and advice.

Courtesy of Zinc



You can read more about writing for mobile audiences in Chapter 5 and designing mobile-friendly messages in Chapter 6. Throughout the book, you'll also see advice on using mobile devices for specific tasks, such as presentations and job searches.

## Intelligent Communication Technology

The most intriguing and potentially disruptive of all contemporary communication tools are a group of capabilities called **intelligent communication technology (ICT)**, which uses artificial intelligence to enhance the communication experience. Although “artificial intelligence” still has a science fiction ring to it, forms of AI are now used extensively in business and business communication. It's a virtual guarantee that you are already experiencing AI as a consumer—Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Netflix, and Spotify are just a few of the companies that rely on AI to deliver their services.<sup>18</sup> In a professional context, you will probably use various forms of AI on the job, and chances are good that you will encounter it during your job search process (although its use may not be visible to you).

Research in AI has been going on for more than a half-century, but the practical outcomes never really lived up to hopes until recently, when several developments converged within the space of a few years. First, the primary focus of the research shifted from pursuing the generalized, humanlike intelligence of science fiction (sometimes called *general AI* or *strong AI*) to developing specialized systems aimed at handling specific tasks such as reading text or recognizing images (called *narrow AI* or *weak AI*). Second, an AI method involving *neural networks*, which emulate the function of neurons in the brain, was refined in a way that made it much more powerful. And third, several vital computer capabilities became available around the same time: massive sets of data that AI systems could learn from, low-cost storage to handle all that data, and fast processors capable of handling the number-crunching that the most common AI approaches require.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to these developments, commercial applications of AI are exploding, and many of these involve business communication.

ICT in its various forms relies on a few fundamental AI techniques that you'll hear about from time to time. You don't necessarily need to know how any of these techniques work, but it helps to have an idea of the capabilities they bring to communication:

- **Machine learning and deep learning.** For any AI system to possess intelligence, it needs to be able to learn, which can include understanding text, converting spoken language to written text, or recognizing the content of photographs and videos. *Machine learning* refers to the general capability of computers to learn, and *deep learning* is a specific type of machine learning that uses layers of neural networks to attack problems at multiple levels (the “deep” part). The growth of practical AI tools in recent years, including the ICT tools available for business communication, is largely the result of advances in deep learning.<sup>20</sup>
- **Natural language processing (NLP).** NLP aims to give computers the ability to understand language in the often-unpredictable (“natural”) ways humans speak and write and to manipulate language in useful ways. NLP involves several challenging issues, including converting speech to text, analyzing text to extract intended meaning, and generating written or oral output (often referred to as *natural language generation*).<sup>21</sup>
- **Computer vision.** In much the same way that NLP pieces together sounds and bits of language to figure out meaning, computer vision analyzes the elements of photos, videos, and live camera images to identify their content. Given how important visual communication has become in business, vision processing is likely to play a key role in the future of business communication.

“Empowering Communicators with Intelligent Communication Technology” on pages 60–63 shows numerous examples of ICT tools used in business today. And throughout the book, keep an eye out for the “Intelligent Communication Technology” highlight boxes that discuss specific tools for business communication—including tools that you can use or that you might encounter while searching for your next job.

*Intelligent communication technology (ICT)* uses artificial intelligence to enhance the communication experience.

Commercial use of AI is expanding rapidly, and much of this use involves business communication.

*Machine learning* is the general capability of computers to learn; *deep learning* is a specific type of machine learning that uses multiple layers of *neural networks*.

---

### MOBILE APP

**ColorNote** for Android helps you capture and organize all the details of daily life, from assignments to job interview notes.

---

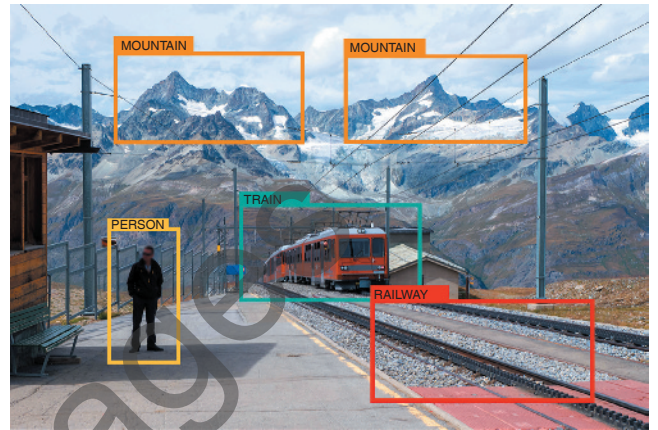


**Chatbots and taskbots** interact with humans to perform a wide variety of communication functions, from answering questions about products to acting as personal assistants. Bots help companies communicate with more people at lower cost. The Gift Genie from Sam’s Club, for instance, can guide customers through product selection questions and seamlessly escalate to human agents when needed. X.ai’s Amy and Andrew taskbots can set up meetings and perform various other tasks as virtual assistants.



Conversable, Inc.

**Image recognition systems** extract information from photos, videos, and live camera images. Search engines, for example, use AI to automatically analyze and tag photos and videos for such purposes as filtering out objectionable content and helping users search for images. This capability can be built into other systems for such purposes as tracking products, counting people, and monitoring public safety.



JIRAPOLU PPRADITCHAROENKUL / Alamy Stock Photo

### Improving Research

Business communication projects often require research, which can involve numerical data, textual content, or visuals (photos, videos, live camera feeds, and so on). When the research involves large amounts of material, ICT tools can help communicators by automating the collection and analysis tasks and by discovering connections and insights that might otherwise go unnoticed.

**Mining and analytics systems** are a diverse class of tools that extract insights from collections of numerical (*data mining, data analytics*) or textual (*text mining, text analytics*) content. Business communicators can use the natural language processing capability of text mining or text analytics for *social listening* to identify themes (such as prevailing customer sentiment or threats to a company’s reputation) hidden in mountains of written information, from Twitter and Facebook posts to customer emails and surveys.

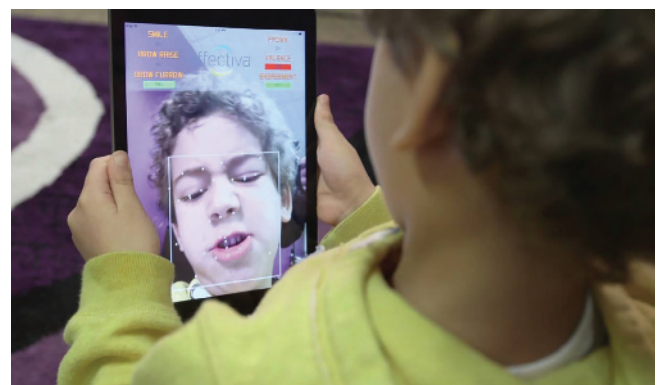


CLARABRIDGE

www.clarabridge.com

© Clarabridge

**Emotion recognition tools** such as Affectiva (see page 43) analyze facial expressions or voices to identify emotional states with the aims of understanding consumer reactions and preferences at a deeper level and bringing a more human feel to digital interaction.

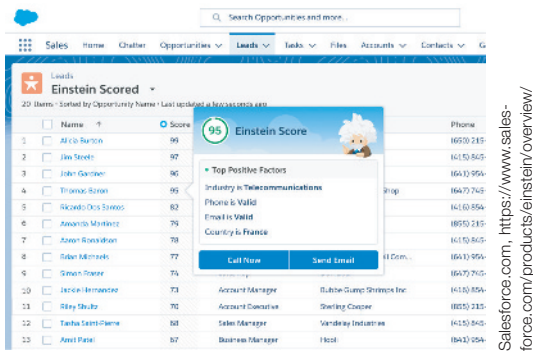


Courtesy of Affectiva

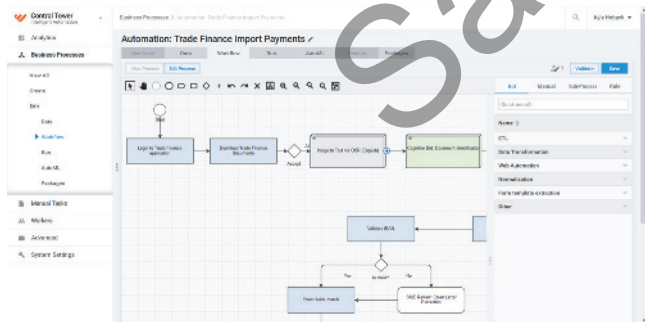
## Enhancing and Automating Decision-Making

A variety of ICT solutions focus on decision-making, which relates closely to communication efforts because professionals frequently need to make decisions about communication, such as identifying which potential customers would be most likely to respond to a sales message.

**Cognitive automation**, also known as *augmented intelligence*, helps professionals make more-informed decisions by applying *predictive analytics* and other techniques to characterize likely outcomes of various decision choices.



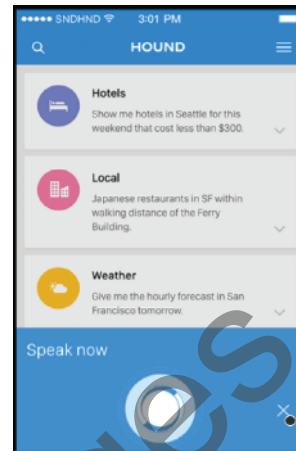
**Robotic process automation (RPA)** aims to do for knowledge work what robots do for manufacturing and other physical processes. RPA targets the high-volume “paperwork” aspects of business and can automate some of the routine communication and manual tasks that this sort of work typically involves.



## Removing Communication Barriers

A variety of AI-enabled tools lower or remove communication barriers by simplifying the process of human-computer interaction or creating experiences that aren't possible in the physical world.

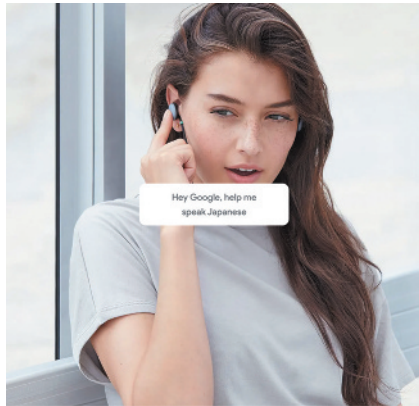
**Voice recognition** has improved dramatically in the last few years, thanks to advances in AI. Voice input is so good now that it is becoming the primary way for millions of people to interact with digital tools and the internet in general.



**Automated translation tools** remove language barriers for website visitors and users. Companies can dramatically lower the costs of *localizing* content for various countries and language users, and anyone can get reasonably close translations of website content using Google Translate and similar services.



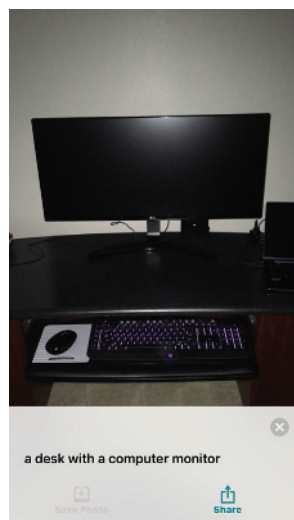
**Real-time voice translation** (see next page) addresses the multiple challenges of recognizing speech, converting it to text in the original language, translating it to a second language, and then synthesizing voice output in that language.



**Virtual reality (VR)** systems create a simulation in which the person experiences the sensation of being in an environment, even though that environment is entirely computer-generated. If it is difficult, expensive, or dangerous to put people in a real-life situation, a VR simulation can let employees experience the sensation of being there and doing whatever tasks are required. VR can also help people experience a product or structure before it is built. Ford uses VR to let engineers “see” design ideas before building anything and to get feedback from drivers by letting them sit in and experience prototype designs before the cars are manufactured.



**Augmented ability tools** help people across a wider spectrum of physical or cognitive ability interact with devices and their immediate environments in more complete and fulfilling ways. For example, Microsoft’s Seeing AI app can help people with limited vision by reading texts, recognizing currency, identifying people, scanning barcodes, and identifying objects (as in the photo to the right).



## Essential ICT Terms

**Artificial Intelligence (AI)** The application of computing power to replicate one or more aspects of human intelligence. Generally speaking, it’s a three-stage process: collecting data or information, analyzing or processing that input to make decisions, then applying the results of that decision-making activity.

**Strong AI, Weak AI** Terms that suggest the scope of an AI activity or design. *Strong AI*, also known as *artificial general intelligence (AGI)*, is the idea of comprehensively replicating human intelligence, including the ability to transfer learning from one task or domain to another, just as humans can. *Weak AI*, or more accurately, *narrow AI*, focuses on a specific problem with techniques optimized for that single domain. All the AI tools having a meaningful impact on business today are weak AI.

**Machine Learning** General term for a system’s ability to teach itself to improve at whatever task or tasks it is designed to do, in contrast to systems in which all the intelligence has been built in by human programmers.

**Deep Learning** A form of machine learning in which layers of computational *neural networks* mimic the functions of the brain’s neurons. Deep learning is a key component of the communication tools in place today.

**Augmented Intelligence, Hybrid Intelligence, Cognitive Automation** Similar terms to describe hybrid solutions in which computers assist humans, and vice versa. For example, an AI system might analyze a collection of data to help a human make a decision, or a system that runs autonomously most of the time might call for human advice when it encounters a problem it can’t solve.

**Natural Language Processing (NLP)** The ability to understand, analyze, and respond to human conversational input. Systems that accept voice input, such as Siri, Alexa, and other voice assistants, also require *speech recognition* capability, which is the ability to convert human speech to text that a computer can then analyze.

**Data Mining, Text Mining** The computerized process of extracting insights from vast collections of numerical or textual records.

## Committing to Ethical and Legal Communication

### 5 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Define *ethics*, explain the difference between an ethical dilemma and an ethical lapse, and list five guidelines for making ethical communication choices.

*Ethics* are the accepted principles of right and wrong that govern behavior and decision-making within a society.

*Ethical communication* includes all the information an audience needs to make an informed decision or take an informed stance on an issue.

Withholding information, distorting information, and plagiarizing are all forms of unethical communication.

*Transparency* is a sense of openness that gives audience members access to all the information they need to process messages accurately.

**Ethics** are the accepted principles of right and wrong that govern behavior and decision-making in a society. Ethical behavior is a companywide concern, but because communication efforts are the public face of a company, they are subjected to particularly rigorous scrutiny from regulators, legislators, investors, consumer groups, environmental groups, labor organizations, and other stakeholders. **Ethical communication** includes all the information an audience needs to make an informed decision or take an informed stance on an issue and is not deceptive in any way. Whenever you communicate in business, you ask audiences to trust that you will provide information that is complete and true. If you intentionally violate that trust, you have engaged in unethical communication.

### FORMS OF UNETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Unethical communication can take several forms: withholding information, distorting information, and plagiarizing. Note that some of these choices can also be illegal in certain circumstances.

#### Withholding Information

First, senders can intentionally withhold information, such as avoiding taking responsibility for mistakes or presenting an incomplete set of facts when making a proposal. The widespread use of social media has increased the attention given to the issue of **transparency**, which in this context refers to a sense of openness, of giving all participants in a conversation access to the information they need to accurately process the messages they are receiving.

In addition to the information itself, audiences deserve to know when they are being marketed to and who is behind the messages they read or hear. Two important concerns in this regard are *native advertising* and *stealth marketing*. Native advertising, also known as *sponsored content*, is advertising material that is designed to look like regular news stories, articles, or social media posts. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires companies to label such material as sponsored content if it is likely to mislead consumers into thinking it is “anything other than an ad.”<sup>22</sup> Industry groups such as the Word of Mouth Marketing Association and the Interactive Advertising Bureau give their members specific guidelines to help prevent consumer confusion.<sup>23</sup>

Stealth marketing is the practice of promoting companies and products without making it clear to the audience that marketing activity is taking place. For example, “street team” marketing, in which team members promote goods and services to their friends and members of the public in exchange for prizes or other compensation, is unethical if team members don’t disclose the fact that they are affiliated with a company and are being rewarded for their efforts. Such practices also violate FTC advertising guidelines.<sup>24</sup>

#### Distorting Information

Intentionally distorting information is also a form of unethical communication. This distortion can involve words, numbers, or images. For example, selectively misquoting someone in order to create a different impression than that person intended is unethical. Statistics and other numerical data can also be presented in ways that distort their implications. Two examples are using averages to conceal extreme individual values and manipulating trend calculations to suggest future values that the underlying data might not support. For example, you might boast that sales increased 40 percent in April as evidence of a big upward trend, when in fact March sales had been a disaster and all that 40 percent increase did was bring sales back to their earlier level. Images can be manipulated in unethical ways, such as altering photos or changing the scale of graphs and charts to exaggerate or conceal differences.

Distortion and outright fabrication of information are becoming greater concerns as the tools for manipulating sound, images, and video become more sophisticated. Convincingly “Photoshopping” images to fool audiences (using Adobe Photoshop or a similar program) has been possible for a while now, and the same potential for deception

is becoming possible for sound and video files—a phenomenon known as *deep fakes*. Business communicators must be more vigilant than ever as information consumers and more careful than ever as information creators.

### Plagiarizing

**Plagiarism** is presenting someone else's words or other creative product as your own. Note that plagiarism can also be illegal if it violates a **copyright**, which is a form of legal protection for the originators of creative content. Copyright law covers a wide range of creative expression, including writing, visual design, computer programming, and sound and video recording.<sup>25</sup>

Note that plagiarism standards and copyright law don't mean you can never use someone else's work. However, you must use it ethically and legally, including properly documenting your sources, clearly labeling anyone else's words and images as theirs, and using only minor portions, such as brief quotations. (Depending on the nature of the project and the material, you might need to get written permission to use material.) You can be sued for copyright infringement if you copy a significant part of a work, even if you don't copy it word for word or profit from doing so.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of *fair use* provides some flexibility in using others' creative work without violating copyright, particularly for noncommercial use, but there are no precise guidelines on how much you can use. And as attorney Kerry O'Shea Gorgone explains, fair use can only be invoked as a legal defense *after* a copyright owner sues you for infringement. You can't simply take someone else's content and preemptively label it as "fair use."<sup>27</sup> (*Content curation* and other forms of social media sharing present some particularly sticky issues; see page 269 for more.)

*Plagiarism* is presenting someone else's words or other creative product as your own.

*Copyright* is a form of legal protection for the originators of creative content.

### DISTINGUISHING ETHICAL DILEMMAS FROM ETHICAL LAPSES

Some ethical questions are easy to recognize and resolve, but others are not. Deciding what is ethical can be a considerable challenge in complex business situations. An **ethical dilemma** involves choosing among alternatives that aren't clear-cut. Perhaps two conflicting alternatives are both ethical and valid, or perhaps the alternatives lie somewhere in the gray area between clearly right and clearly wrong. Every company has responsibilities to multiple groups of people inside and outside the firm, and those groups often have competing interests. For instance, employees naturally want higher wages and more benefits, but investors who have risked their money in the company want management to keep costs low so that profits are strong enough to drive up the stock price. Both sides have a valid ethical position.

In contrast, an **ethical lapse** is a clearly unethical choice. With both internal and external communication efforts, the pressure to produce results or justify decisions can make unethical communication a tempting choice. Telling a potential customer you can complete a project by a certain date when you know you can't is simply dishonest. There is no ethical dilemma here.

Compare the messages in Figures 1.9 and 1.10 on the following pages for examples of how business messages can be unethically manipulated.

An *ethical dilemma* is a choice between alternatives that may all be ethical and valid to varying degrees.

An *ethical lapse* is making a choice you know to be unethical.

### ENSURING ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Employers have a responsibility to establish clear guidelines for ethical behavior, including ethical business communication. Many companies establish an explicit ethics policy by using a written **code of ethics** to help employees determine what is acceptable. A code is often part of a larger program of employee training and communication channels (such as *ethics hotline* phone numbers) that allow employees to ask questions and report instances of questionable ethics.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to setting clear ethical standards, managers must also demonstrate ethical behavior themselves and support employees who face ethical dilemmas. Codes and training don't mean much if employees feel pressured to make unethical choices or see their superiors acting unethically.

Whether or not a company has formal guidelines in place, every employee has a responsibility to communicate in an ethical manner. To make sure you are communicating ethically, keep these five questions in mind:

- Is my intention honorable, and does it demonstrate respect for my audience?

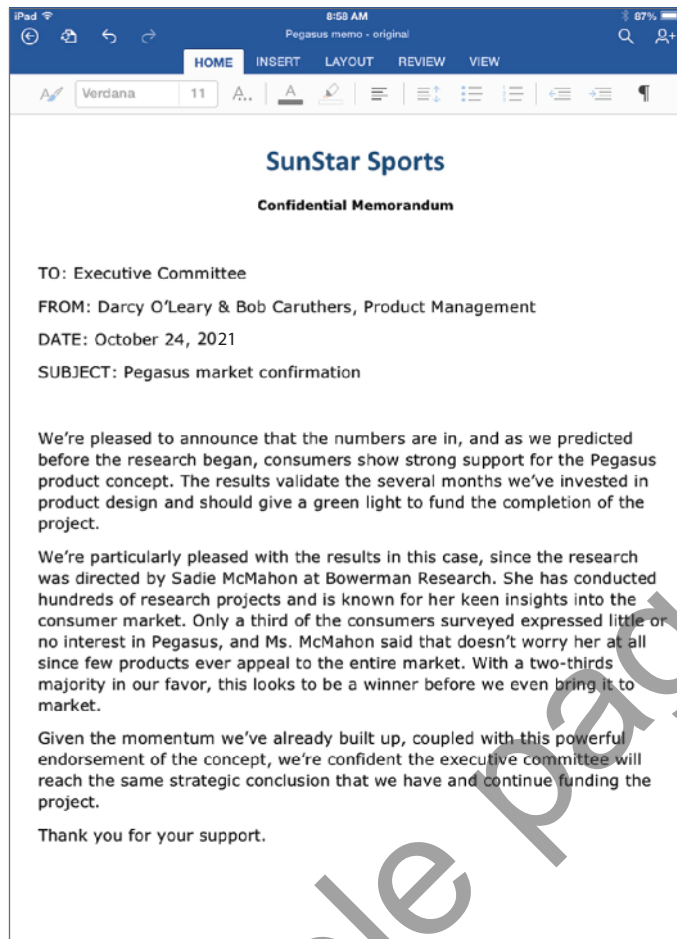
A *code of ethics* is a document that outlines a company's ethics policies and establishes expectations for all employees.

(a) The subject line is misleading. As you'll see, the research did *not* confirm the market potential for the new Pegasus product.

(c) The writers present McMahon's experience in a way that suggests it supports their claim, which isn't true. Plus, they don't provide any of McMahon's original text, so readers can't verify for themselves.

(e) This paragraph also mixes McMahon's opinions and conclusions with O'Leary and Caruthers's own opinions.

(g) The closing line assumes the writers have the committee's support, which may not be true.



(b) The opening paragraph is dishonest, as you'll see in Figure 1.12. The phrase "as we predicted" also suggests that O'Leary and Caruthers had their minds made up before the research even started. Plus, the writers don't provide any background on the research or offer ways for readers to see the results for themselves.

(d) The statement that "a two-thirds majority" expressed interest in the product concept is not true, as you can see in Figure 1.10.

(f) The writers bias the conversation again by implying that the executive committee would be making a mistake if it disagreed with them.

**Figure 1.9 Unethical Communication**

The writers of this memo clearly want the company to continue funding their pet project, even though the marketing research doesn't support such a decision. By comparing this memo with the version shown in Figure 1.10 (be sure to read the lettered annotations), you can see how the writers twisted the truth and omitted evidence in order to put a positive "spin" on the research.

To judge whether you are communicating ethically, ask yourself

- Am I being honorable?
- Am I giving people the information they need?
- Have I considered the effects of my message?
- Am I respecting the rights of others?
- Would a different approach be better?

- Am I giving my readers or listeners all the information they need to take an informed stance or make an informed decision?
- Have I considered the effect my message will have on the audience and anyone else who might be affected by it?
- Am I respecting the legal and moral rights of anyone whose information or ideas I am using?
- Could a different approach produce a more positive outcome for everyone involved?

If you still can't decide whether a choice is ethical, picture yourself explaining your decision to someone whose opinion you value. Could you comfortably live with your choice?

### ENSURING LEGAL COMMUNICATION

In addition to ethical guidelines, business communication is also bound by a wide variety of laws and regulations, including the following areas:

- **Promotional communication.** Anyone who creates marketing messages needs to be aware of the many laws that govern truth and accuracy in advertising. These laws address such issues as false and deceptive advertising, claims expressed on product packaging, the use of celebrity testimonials, and bait-and-switch tactics in which a store advertises a lower-priced product to lure consumers into a store but then tries to sell them a more expensive item.<sup>29</sup> Chapter 12 explores this area in more detail.
- **Contracts.** A **contract** is a legally binding promise between two parties in which one party makes a specified offer and the other party accepts.<sup>30</sup> Contracts cover a wide

Business communication is governed by a wide variety of laws designed to ensure accurate, complete messages.



- (a) This neutral subject line doesn't try to sell the conclusion before readers have the opportunity to review the evidence for themselves.
- (c) By providing the complete text of the researcher's summary, the memo allows readers to reach their own conclusions about what she wrote.
- (e) The writers are careful to separate the researcher's observations and opinions from their own, even to the point of grouping them under separate subheadings.
- (g) The close invites further discussion of the situation, without assuming agreement with the writers' conclusions.



- (b) Rather than hardselling a conclusion that isn't even true, this opening offers a quick overview of the research and emphasizes the experience of the researcher. In the second paragraph, the writers continue by offering full disclosure of all background information related to the research project.
- (d) The numbers here show how the original memo skewed the results. Just because one-third had no interest in the product does not mean two-thirds did. Moreover, the second paragraph from the researcher clearly indicates that she is concerned about the product's viability in the marketplace—a critical point completely missing in the original memo.
- (f) The recommendation states clearly and objectively that the project probably will not live up to original hopes.

Screenshot of Microsoft Outlook 2018, ©Microsoft Corporation

**Figure 1.10 Ethical Communication**

This version of the memo from Figure 1.9 presents the evidence in a more honest and ethical manner.

range of business scenarios, including employment, purchasing and leasing, project services, and nondisclosure agreements.

- **Employee communication.** A variety of local, state, and federal laws govern communication between employers and both potential and current employees. For example, employers are required to inform employees about workplace hazards, such as toxic chemicals.<sup>31</sup>
- **Intellectual property.** In an age when instant global connectivity makes copying and retransmitting electronic files effortless, the protection of digital and creative assets has become a widespread concern. **Intellectual property (IP)** includes copyrighted materials as well as *industrial property* such as patents, product designs, and logos.<sup>32</sup>
- **Financial reporting.** Finance and accounting professionals who work for publicly traded companies (those that sell stock to the public) must adhere to stringent reporting laws.
- **Defamation.** Negative comments about another party raise the possibility of **defamation**, the intentional public communication of false statements that damage character or reputation. Written defamation is called *libel*; spoken defamation is called *slander*.<sup>33</sup>
- **Transparency requirements.** Governments around the world are taking steps to help ensure that consumers and other parties know who is behind the information they receive, particularly when it appears online. In the United States, for example, the FTC requires influencers such as celebrities and professional athletes to disclose any relationships they have with companies when they promote or endorse products in social media.<sup>34</sup>

*Intellectual property (IP)* includes copyrighted materials and *industrial property* such as patents, product designs, and logos.

*Defamation* is the intentional public communication of false statements that damage character or reputation.

If you have any doubts about the legality of a message you intend to distribute, ask for advice from your company's legal department. A small dose of caution can prevent huge legal headaches and protect your company's reputation in the marketplace.