

# 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 six 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.

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### ON THE JOB: COMMUNICATING AT KLM

If you have ever served a customer, you know how challenging it can be to ensure that their experience with your company is a positive one and that they 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 be aware of the specific details of each customer as it responds 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.



Gaertner/Alamy Stock Photo

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

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 2 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 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 media 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>

TWITTER.COM/KLM

## Understanding Why Communication Matters

Communication is complex, and KLM's ambitious social media program highlights its importance to every business (see the chapter opener). **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 understanding.<sup>2</sup> As Figure 1.1 on the next page 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 the 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 will spend part of your career as one of these independent freelancers, working without the support network that an established company environment provides. You will have 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

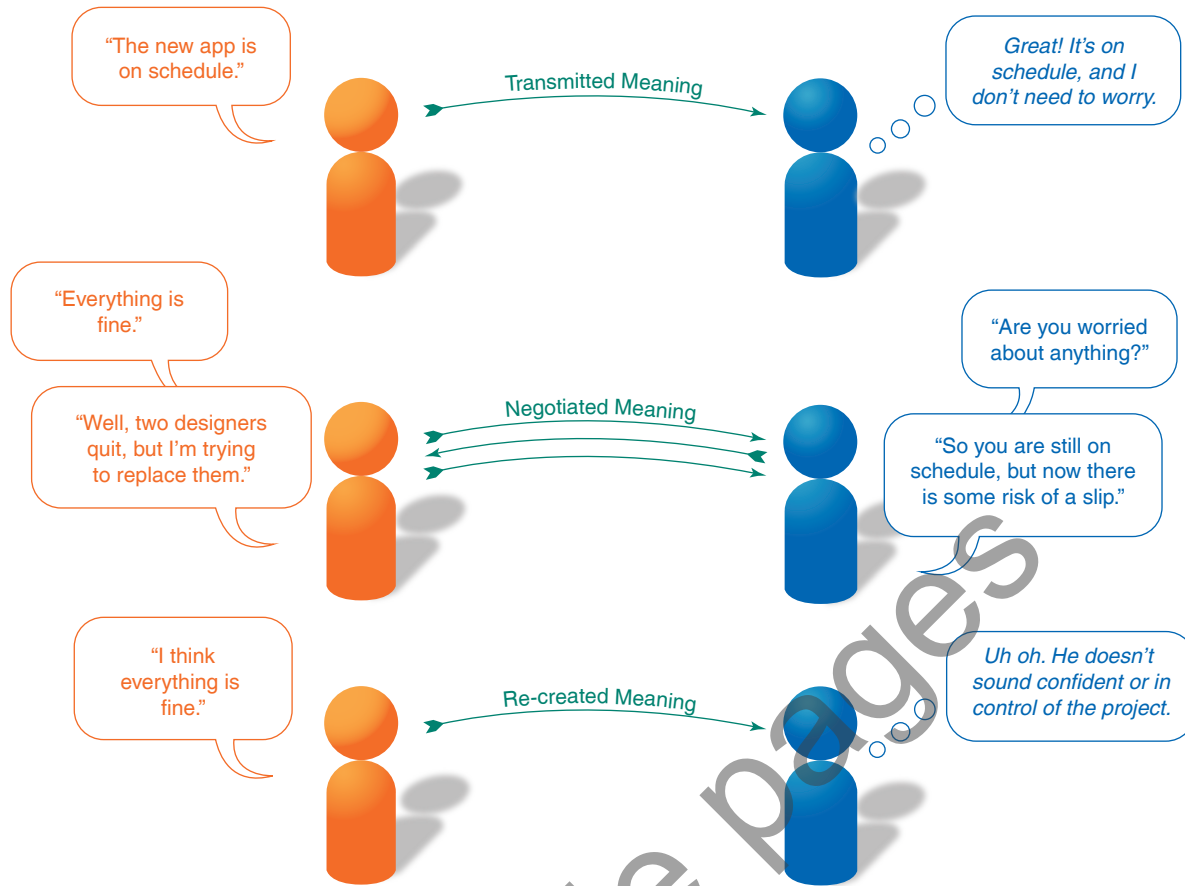
#### 1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

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 to have strong communication skills.



**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.

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**Check out the cutting edge of business communication**

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workdays communicating, and businesspeople who can't communicate well don't stand much chance of reaching the top.

No matter which path 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.

**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 ways:

- **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.

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

- **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>

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.

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

## WHAT MAKES BUSINESS COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVE?

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

Effective messages are *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, convincing, accurate, and ethical. Even when an opinion is called for, present compelling evidence to support your conclusion.
- **Present information in a concise, efficient manner.** 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 a specific audience. When appropriate, clearly state what you expect from audience members or what you can do for them.
- **Offer compelling, persuasive arguments and recommendations.** When a situation calls for persuasive communication, show your readers how they will benefit by responding 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 on the next page.

## Communicating as a Professional

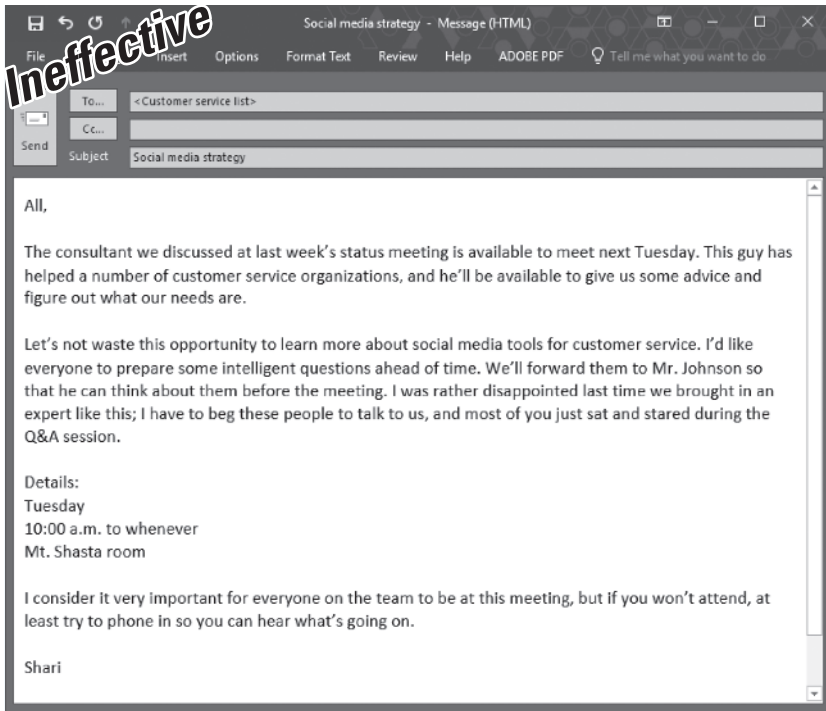
You’ve been communicating your entire life, of course, but if you don’t have a lot of work experience yet, meeting the expectations of a professional environment might require some adjustment. A good place to start is to consider what it means to be a professional. **Professionalism** is the quality 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, making ethical decisions, and maintaining a positive outlook (see Figure 1.3 on page 45).

A key message to glean from Figure 1.3 is how much these elements of professionalism depend on effective communication. For example, to be a team player, you need to 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.

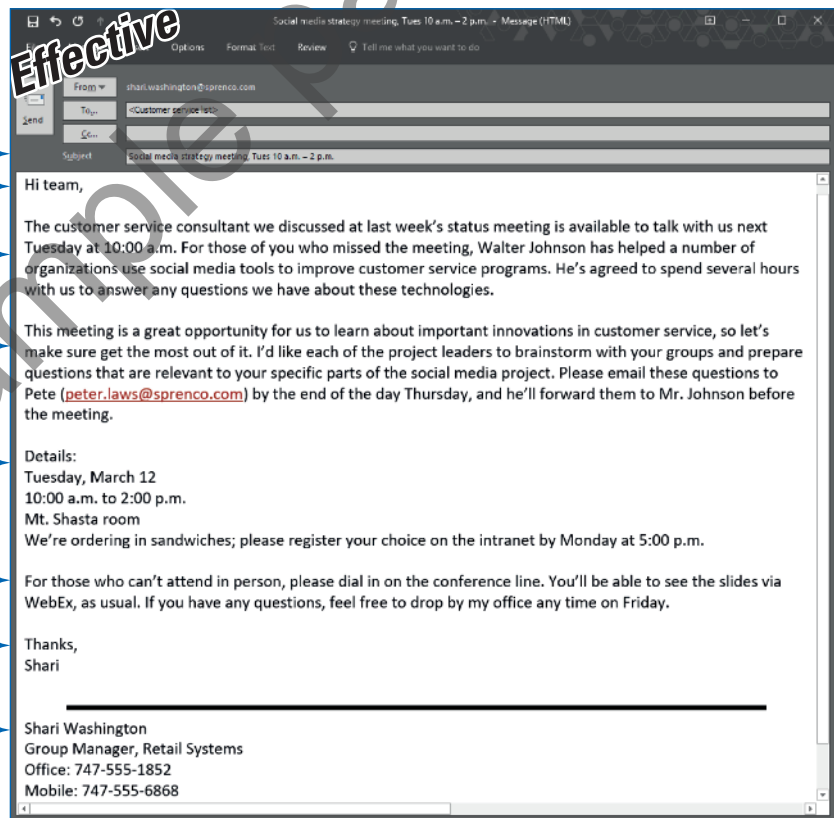
This section offers a brief look at the skills employers will expect you to have, the nature of communication in an organizational environment, and the importance of adopting an audience-centered approach.

**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.



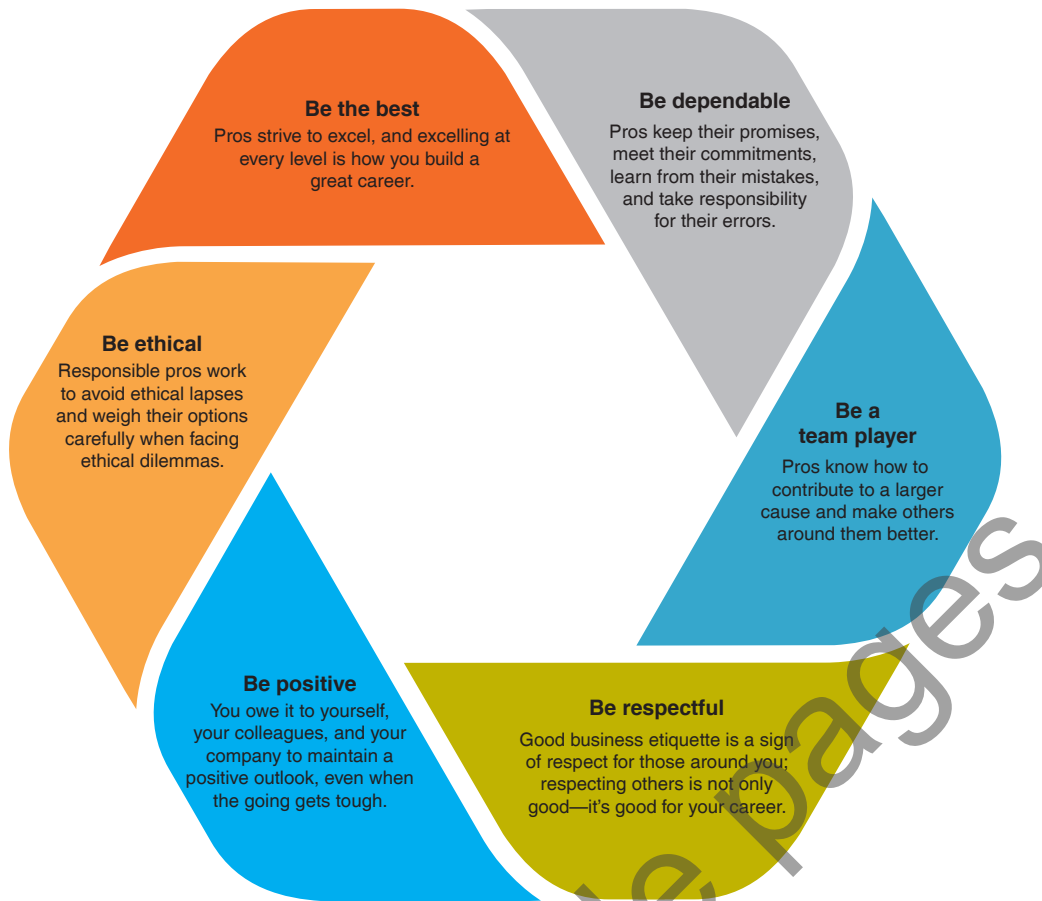
- (a) The vague subject line fails to alert people to the upcoming meeting.
- (b) The greeting is cold and off-putting.
- (c) The opening paragraph fails to provide necessary background information for anyone who missed the meeting.
- (d) A negative, accusatory tone puts readers on the defensive, and 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.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT EMPLOYERS EXPECT FROM YOU

Today's employers expect you to be competent at a range of communication tasks that reflect the value of communication discussed on pages 42–43:

- **Acquiring, processing, and sharing information.** Employers expect you to be able to recognize information needs, locate and evaluate reliable sources of information (particularly from online sources), 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.
- **Representing your employer in the public arena.** Employers expect you to conduct yourself 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 at your disposal.** 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.

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.

### MOBILE APP

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

## APPLY YOUR SKILLS NOW

## Practice Your Professionalism

Don't wait until you're on the job to develop your professionalism. College gives you multiple opportunities to hone your approach to work, which will help you hit the ground running after you graduate. 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 those skills.

Here are three opportunities to start pursuing 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 that 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'll 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 211 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?

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

## 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 from employees to middle managers and from 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 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>

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

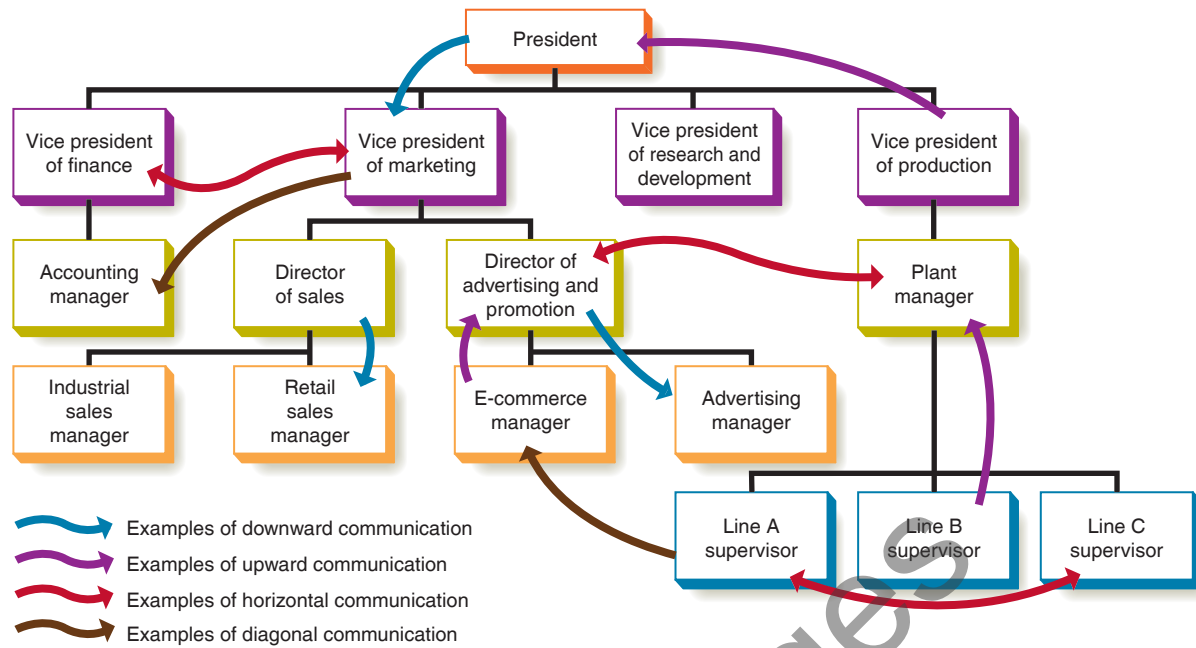
Every organization also has an **informal communication network**, which encompasses all communication that occurs outside of formal channels. Some of this informal communication takes place naturally when employees interact on the job and in social settings, and some of it takes place when the formal network doesn't provide information that employees want. In fact, the limitations of formal communication networks helped spur the growth of social media in the business environment. 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 company gossip, this situation could be a sign that the formal network is not functioning effectively.

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## Ten communication skills that will boost your career

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**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).

## ADOPTING AN AUDIENCE-CENTERED APPROACH

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, age, 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 3.

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

## Exploring the Communication Process

Even with the best intentions, communication efforts can fail. Messages can get lost or simply 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.

**3** LEARNING OBJECTIVE  
Contrast the conventional communication process model with the social communication model.



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

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.

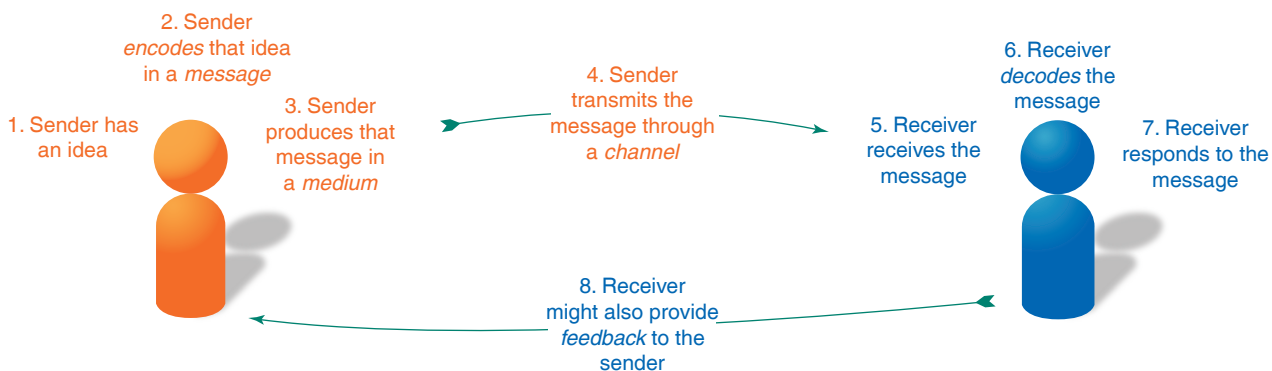
When receivers *decode* messages, they extract meaning from the words or images they've received.

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

## THE CONVENTIONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

By viewing communication as a process (Figure 1.5), you can identify and improve the skills you need in order 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 offer a solution to a problem, you have a better chance of crafting a meaningful message than if your motivation is merely to complain about a problem.
- 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).
- 5. The audience receives the message.** If the channel functions properly, the message reaches its intended 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 50) 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” (page 50) 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 51) 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



**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.

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.

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 the sender’s 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 computer screens cluttered with instant messages and reminders popping up all over the place. 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, the need to insulate yourself from noise and distractions is going to 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*, any human or technological interventions between the sender and the receiver. Filtering can be both intentional (such as automatically filing incoming messages based on sender or content) or unintentional (such as an overly aggressive spam filter that deletes 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 your message can distort it or filter it to meet their own needs.
- **Channel breakdowns.** Sometimes the channel simply breaks down and fails to deliver your message at all. A colleague you were counting on to deliver a message to your boss might have forgotten to do so, or a computer server might have crashed and prevented your blog from updating.

Everyone in an organization can help minimize barriers and distractions. As a communicator, try to be aware of any barriers that could prevent your messages from reaching their intended audiences. As a manager, 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. Turn off that mobile phone before you step into a meeting. Don’t talk across the tops of other people’s cubicles, and don’t play music at a level that can distract others.



### REAL-TIME UPDATES

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#### The process breakdowns that lead to miscommunication

This humorous video illustrates how communication efforts break down and how to avoid common problems. Go to [real-timeupdates.com/ebc13](http://real-timeupdates.com/ebc13) and select Learn More in the Students section.

*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.

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. Understanding how audiences receive, decode, and respond to messages will help you create more effective messages.

### How Audiences Receive Messages

For an audience member to receive a message, three events need to occur: The receiver has to *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 on mobile phones, 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 listen to 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. However, for most business communication efforts, 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 often put information about the company on a page called "About" or "About Us," so many visitors 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 on. 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 temporary moods.

To truly receive a message, audience members need to sense it, select it, 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.

Our minds have a variety of self-defense mechanisms that protect our perceptions of the world and of ourselves, and our minds 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 example, if you ask four people to review a business plan that you believe is rather 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 on sales figures “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

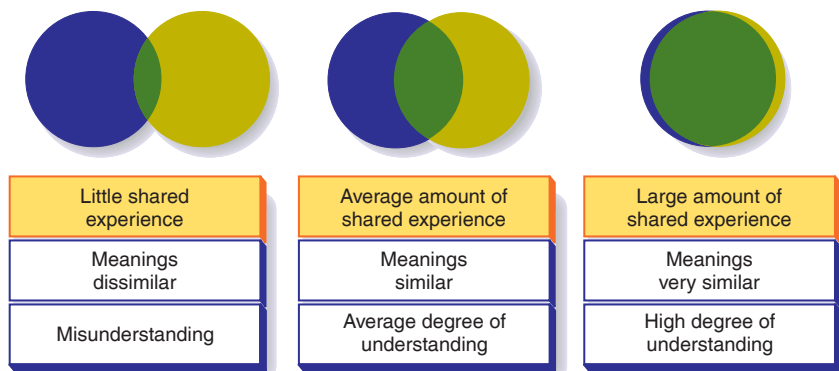
Your message has been delivered, received, and correctly decoded. Now what? Will audience members respond in the way you’d like them to? Only if three events occur.

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, 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 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 5), you can work to minimize these unsuccessful outcomes.

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.

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.

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

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.

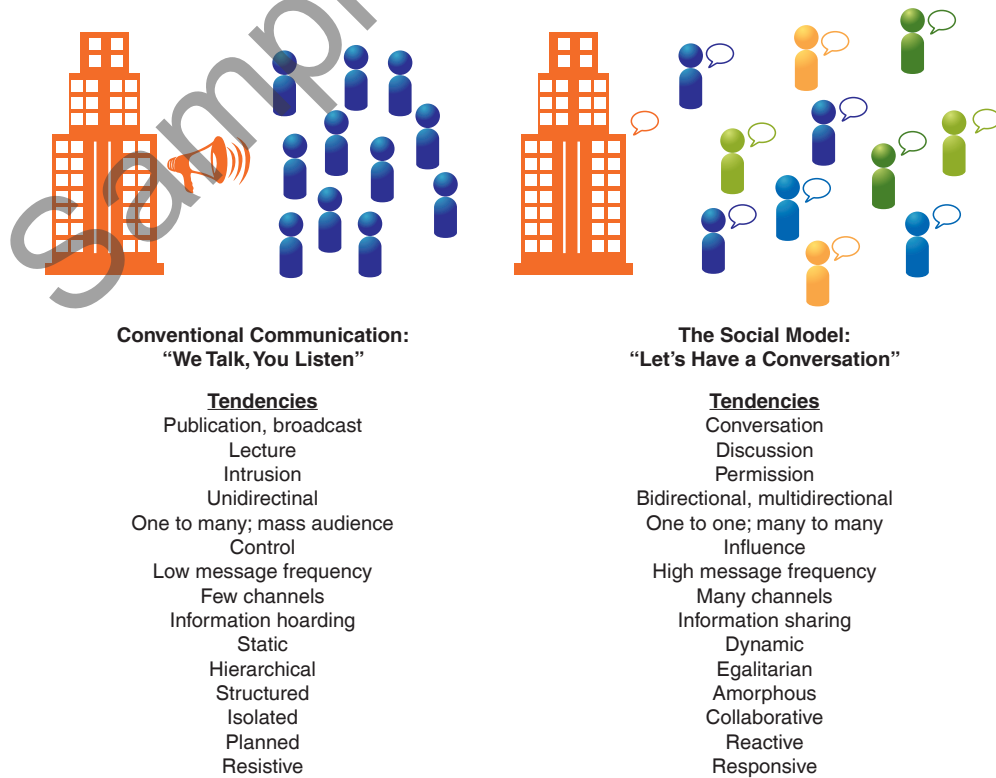
### THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

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 much 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 messages of 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.

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.

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



**Figure 1.7 The Social Communication Model**

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

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 usually 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.

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 below).

## 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 various 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 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 tools 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 the book, you'll see examples of both simple and esoteric technologies that deliver these benefits, including in the special feature on pages 58–61, "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 the book, you'll see advice on keeping the focus on your messages and 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,

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

**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.

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

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 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 ill will, pick up the phone or visit the other party in person if you can. A few minutes of direct conversation can often work wonders.

## 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’ll have a basic familiarity with how many of these systems work. You can read more about collaboration systems in Chapter 3 and business uses of social networking in Chapter 8.

### 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 location. With mobile devices everywhere you look these days, it probably comes as no surprise that mobile 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

*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.



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