

## MODULE 4: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

### Module Introduction

The way we communicate with each other has changed dramatically in recent years due to constant technological developments. With the increasing variety of new communication options: email, mobile phone calls, video calls, chat, etc., the correct choice of media has become a challenge.

Another challenge are the new rules for communication we have to learn and adopt due to the fact that there is quite a big difference in the way we communicate face-to-face compared to how we communicate online.

When communicating via digital media, especially without seeing someone's face and reactions to the delivered message, many people tend not to take into consideration, that there is a different communication etiquette, called "**Netiquette**". If someone is not directly affected by their counterpart's reactions, they tend to be more direct and, in some situations, that might sound rude. Following the Netiquette rules is crucial for collaboration in digital work environment.

Here is what you should be careful about:

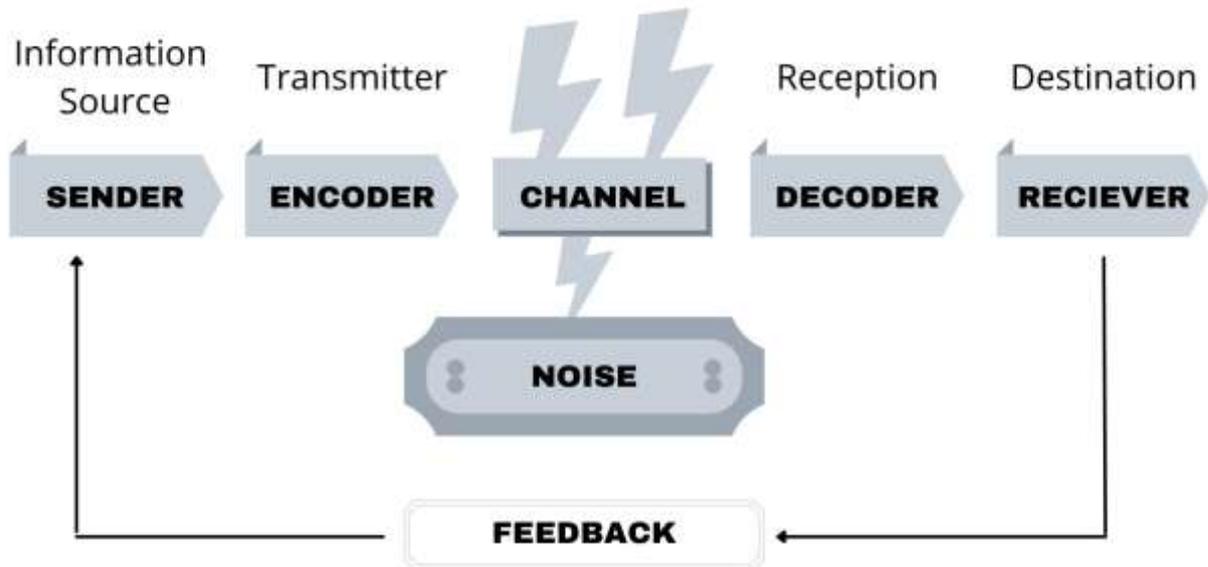
1. Be respectful: It might sound like a given fact for communication in general but as experience shows, people tend to be more respectful when interacting face-to-face with someone, while unconsciously applying less respect when writing a message to someone.
2. Stick to the message: When writing a message, which will be sent online, it is important to stick to the actual message, be as short as possible, clear and precise.
3. Be careful when using emojis: If you are not sure whether the receiver uses emojis, it is advised that you refrain from doing so.
4. Be aware that privacy matters: do not use / forward / share other people's messages, pictures, or other content. If the person has not given you their approval to share their email address or other contact data, you should refrain from doing so.

In general, it is advised to read a written message out loud for yourself before sending it. You might realize that some parts seem too strong, rude or inappropriate in another way. This allows you to change the message before sending. Last but not least – you should not feel offended if you get a message, in which the sender violates any of the Netiquette rules. In such cases it is best to provide feedback to the sender in order to check whether you are interpreting the message correctly. By doing this, you also give them a chance to be more careful with their online communication in the future.

Nowadays we have multiple choices for online communication, not only at work, but also in private. This variety can be quite confusing sometimes.

Shannon-Weaver's model highlights how important the channel of communication really is. Is the message being delivered digitally or face-to-face? Is it in written form in an e-mail or SMS, or IM (instant message).

## Shannon-Weaver's Model of Communication



The sender is the originator of the message or information who puts the message into an encoder (for example writing an email message). The message goes through the email channel via Internet and arrives at the decoder, decoding the email into understandable words for the receiver. Here it is important that both parties use the same code. If, for example, someone sends a message in another language, the other party might not have the correct tools to understand the message, despite how informative and precise it might be. In this case the message will not be understood by the receiver.

Depending on the communication channel different types of noise may change or influence the message. In the digital environment for example: images might not be displayed properly, chat messages are short, voice recordings have too much background noise, etc. It is also important for the message to actually include the correct amount of information, otherwise you risk no or negative feedback from the receiver.

The digital business communication assumes not only exchanging information online internally within the organization, but also between the companies. Due to COVID-19 pandemic closures, we are facing more often the substitution of face-to-face meeting with potential business partners, clients, etc., whom we do not know, with online meetings on which we have to establish a collaboration. Nowadays there are lots of online tools available. Emails are still one of the most common digital collaboration tools, considering they can consist of text, images, links and other media and can deliver a lot of information in a fast and simple way. But software platforms like Skype, Teams, Zoom, etc. are facing a boost in their use. They allow colleagues, partners, customers and students who might be thousands of kilometres apart or just next door, but locked down, to easily communicate and, most

importantly, see each other. These platforms also provide us an immediate reply system, a chat function, where with a couple of clicks we can deliver a message to single or multiple receivers.

Even when the pandemic is completely over, we will continue to use all these digital tools for online collaboration because they have undisputed advantages like:

- Faster exchange of information and opinion;
- Immediate access / links to further sources (reading materials, videos, etc.)
- Enhanced reach of exchange and collaboration no matter of location distances.

In the following activities, you will be given the opportunity to practice and improve your digital communication skills at work.

You can listen to the material [here](#).

### Activity 1

The **Netiquette** assumes that we pay special attention to whether we act respectfully when communicating online. People tend to be more respectful when interacting face-to-face with someone while unconsciously applying less respect when writing an online message. Most people would not scream at the other person, when standing right in front of them, but are fast to write in all capital letters in an email, which amounts to the same thing. Often, we use exclamation points and capital letters to replace the missing intonation of actual face-to-face conversation. But even when hearing the actual intonation, the sender and receiver might interpret a message differently. This issue is even bigger with written communication online. The reader of the message might interpret the writing style in a different way than the sender, feeling offended and hurt. It can lead to misunderstandings and confrontation between the sender and the receiver.

So today, pay special attention to how you write your online messages. Are they respectful? Have you taken care to express clearly what you mean? Do you use proper address and farewell lines? Do you avoid emotional writing, like capital letters for example?

### Activity 2

Let's now pay attention to the length and clarity of your online messages. When holding a speech or giving someone an explanation in person, the speaker can use intonation, breathing breaks, laughing or other ways to bring life to their speech. When delivering a message online, it is all shown as plain text. That is why it is important to stick to the actual message and not flood the receiver with text, which might cause confusion and misunderstanding. Too much information is as confusing as too little.

The general idea of instant messaging platforms (Viber, Messenger, WhatsApp, etc) is to send short text, but it is good to remember that we should apply similar rules to our email correspondence. Have you come across the unofficial rule of the business email correspondence which says: “If you cannot write your email text message in less than 5 rows (50 to 125 words), do not send it at all. The receiver might never read it till the end and you will be misled.”

So, today pay attention how long the online messages you send are.

### Activity 3

Let's now focus on the grammar and spelling of your online messages.

Everyone makes grammar and spelling mistakes once in a while but when communicating online we can benefit from the availability of such programs like Spellchecker.

However, in today's time of social media, people are inclined to use shortenings like “imo” (in my opinion), “brb” (be right back) and others to shorten their time for writing. In a professional, educational or other formal online communication, unlike the one within the family and close friends, such shortenings have absolutely no place. They seem insincere, unprofessional and lazy and should only be used in situations where there is a common understanding and acceptance of using such shortenings (if both parties previously agreed to using such grammar/spelling in a face-to-face meeting).

Write carefully today and pay attention whether and how many shortenings you use. In case you are getting messages with shortenings you do not understand, use the occasion to provide respectful feedback to the sender.

### Activity 4

Let's try to be careful when using emojis in our business correspondence. People tend to use emojis to show their meaning behind a sentence, sometimes to underline their humour, show their anger or highlight their confusion about the matter. In general, it is not always inappropriate to use emojis in a professional setting but it is important to know the receiver and purpose of the message. If both parties have a common understanding and deem the situation comfortable enough to use emojis, the use of such is no problem. In other situations, it might be inappropriate, offensive and unprofessional to use emojis. It is advised not to use emojis with people you have never met face-to-face, in first time interactions and when you are still using polite speech with someone. If you are unsure whether to use emojis or not, it is advised to refrain from doing so.

Today count whether and how many emojis you use in your business correspondence and compare it to the number of emojis you use in chats with your friends and family members.

## Activity 5

Let's focus on the awareness of how easy it is for us to work with digital tools.

Make a list with the digital tools you have worked with during last week and make sure you have minimum one which you find easy to use and helpful and minimum one that you find difficult to use or unnecessary for your work.

Discuss in a phone conversation or face-to-face meeting with a colleague the digital tool/s that you find difficult to use or unnecessary (the colleague should have used the same tool in order to provide relevant feedback.) Find out whether they have faced the same problems or if the digital tools were useful in their work. Try to get some help from your colleague or, if both of you are facing problems, look for help within your organization.

## Activity 6

Consider these 4 scenarios at work:

- Informing someone of a deadline
- Promoting a product or project
- Introducing someone
- Explaining instructions to someone

Choose at least one scenario and write down the messages you will convey to someone you work with in following occasions:

- Face-to-face
- Online via email

Reflect on both messages and figure out which one is easier for you. Do you think that any of the above mentioned 4 situations is more appropriate for online or for face-to-face communication?

## Activity 7

Over the years many researchers have developed different models to evaluate digital tools and technology, as example TAM Technology Acceptance Model (Fishbein, Ajzen, 1967). There are many variations for digital tool evaluations especially in regards to learning tools and technology.

Many of the models identify the following areas of evaluation:

- Functionality (ease of use, extent of usage, support, customization and continuous creative engagement)

- Accessibility (required additional tools, costs, and in recent years, cross platform availability)
- Technical aspects (integration and combination with other tools, technical requirements)
- Privacy & Data Protection (Legal framework, registration, personal information)

Choose an online collaboration tool you use most in your work (i.e. Zoom, Teams, Skype, WebEx, etc.) and evaluate it using the above mentioned areas.

Write down your thoughts / observations and share them with your manager or company IT support – it will be very useful for them to know the opinion of their “customers”.

## Activity 8

Real time communication tools like Zoom, Skype, Teams etc. also require specific skills and may be taxing on our time and our nerves. Besides the issue of always having to learn to use new apps and their new features there is also the problem of fatigue. We get tired much faster when we are in an online meeting, compared to when we are in a face-to-face meeting, for example. There is already some research into this phenomenon, which says that this is as a result of a big part of the non-verbal clues to which we are used in face-to-face communication being lost in online communication. Subconsciously we seek for them and we don't find them, which tires us much faster. This understanding should lead us to correct planning of online meetings: shorter, more precise and up to the point.

Think about your upcoming online meetings. How long are they? Can they be shortened? Have you planned for a break at each hour if the meeting has to take longer? Have you prepared your script for the meeting: questions you need to ask, information you need to deliver? Are you planning to use some interactive activities like voting in order to engage the participants more effectively (i.e. tools like Slido.com are very useful in such cases.) Take some time to plan, this will help you shorten the meetings and reduce fatigue from them.

## Activity 9

### Summary

In this module, you have learned what the differences in the etiquette of face-to-face and online communication are, how to convey an online message in a proper manner and how to evaluate the online collaboration tools you use in your work.

At the end of this module, dedicated to “Business Communication in Digital Environments”, please create your own list with action points that will help you to improve the quality of your daily online business communication. Regularly look at this list to remind yourself the points you find important.

We hope that the information that we have shared in this module has been useful and you have had fun while doing the activities!

Move to the next module to learn another topic that will help you prevent the digital stress.

### **Suggested Further Readings and Bibliography**

1. Digital Skills Global <https://digitalskillsglobal.com/>
2. Lieberman A., Schroeder J. (2019): Two social lives: How differences between online and offline interaction influence social outcomes in Current Opinion in Psychology (2020),
3. Weller T. (2007): Information history: its importance, relevance and future, City University London, London
4. European Commission (2019): The Digital Competence Framework 2.0, <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp/digital-competence-framework>
5. Jeremy N. Bailenson: Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue; Volume 2, Issue 1. DOI: 10.1037/tmb0000030, <https://tmb.apaopen.org/pub/nonverbal-overload/release/2>