



Establishing Effective Telecommunication System

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Make telecommuting work
- ✓ Deal with workplace rage
- ✓ Address technological issues

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Time-Saving Tools

E-Mail Applications

Once upon a time, e-mail was a new thing. It was heralded as a way to reduce paper waste, improve communication, and make the world smaller. Those people should see you now, with 639 new messages to go through on top of all your other work!

Test your Knowledge

What e-mail application do you use?

What tips do you have for managing e-mail?

What could you do in the future to make working with e-mail more efficient?

Tips and Tricks

E-mail can be a great tool, but it can also negatively affect productivity. Set your e-mail program to only check your e-mail once every hour. Some time management experts even suggest dealing with e-mail only once or twice a day.

To help you stay organized, create folders to organize your messages, just like you organize files on your hard drive. Most applications also feature the ability to configure rules to automatically move e-mails with a particular subject or sender to a particular folder.

Save your inbox for action items. Move items you have read or dealt with to a folder for that sender or subject or delete them.

As well, take the time to learn how to make the most of your e-mail application. If the program supports reminders, categories, follow-up flags, or any other time-saving organizational features, take a few minutes to learn how it works and use it.

Create and update your address list. This will save you time when addressing messages, and make sure you get the address right. As well, make use of mailing lists. No more wondering if Barb is on the social committee... just punch in the list name and send!

E-Mail Etiquette

Like instant messaging and the telephone, e-mail should not be used for personal issues. There are also some etiquette rules to follow when using e-mail.

- Address people properly.
- Don't type in all capitals; this is the equivalent to shouting.
- Use proper spelling and grammar; most e-mail applications include a spell checker.
- Avoid using acronyms.
- If you're on an e-mail discussion list, don't send e-mails that just say, "I agree." Make sure your posts have some value.
- Make sure your contact information (phone numbers as well as e-mail address) is included in each message.
- Know when to use the phone!

There are a few things to keep in mind when sending attachments, too.

- Check the size of your file. If it is too large, some people might not want to receive it, or it might not send at all.
- Make sure your file doesn't have any viruses in it.
- Title your attachment properly (by changing the file name in your operating system) so people won't think it's a virus.
- Try to send files that can be opened by common programs.

- Most e-mail applications will block certain kinds of files that can be harmful, like executable (.exe) files.

Scheduling Applications

You can also use the computer to schedule your time and keep on top of tasks. The Active Desktop Calendar program is one of the simplest applications out there: it displays a calendar on your desktop (right on top of your wallpaper) and allows you to add tasks and appointments. (Some applications even have a calendar built right in – just make sure you use something you can synchronize all your tools with!)

Another option is integrated scheduling applications. Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes are examples of this type of scheduling program. These programs allow you to access e-mail, schedule time, and manage contacts (more on that in a moment) all from one place. They also have advanced scheduling features; Outlook, for example, allows you to schedule meetings and send invitations.

Here are some tips for using computer-based scheduling software.

- Like e-mail applications, take the time to learn how the scheduling software works. You will quickly recoup the initial time investment.
- If an activity (such as a task, meeting, or appointment) will take longer than 30 minutes, schedule it.
- Use the application consistently. Track all appointments and tasks in the same location; don't use a day planner for tasks and some appointments and the software for the rest. Keeping things consistent means you will get things done.
- Use the alarm feature so that you're reminded of tasks and appointments.

Contact Management Applications

Most e-mail applications feature a way to manage contacts. This is a great tool to make use of; adding people to your contacts keeps all your information in one place, makes it searchable, and makes addressing e-mails and scheduling meetings easier.

There are also some advanced applications that are designed for more advanced contact management and communications tracking. These tools are typically aimed at salespeople.

What tips do you have for using contact management software?

Telephone Etiquette

Basic Tips

Even if your business doesn't use computers, laptops, or tablets, everyone has a telephone. The key to managing the telephone is the same as using any other device: keep it work-related.

Cell Phones

Cell phones can be harder to manage than a typical office phone as they're often attached to our hip. If you're in the office or in a meeting, set your phone to vibrate. Even better, have the calls forwarded to your office phone; this way you won't be distracted as easily. And, remember that when you're using a cell phone, you're not in a soundproof box: everyone around you can hear the conversation.

Voice Mail

You probably don't think of it, but voice mail can save you tons of time. Like other technologies, it only works if you use it properly.

To start, make sure your voice mail is set up properly. This will help reduce phone and e-mail traffic and save you time pushing buttons. Things to check include:

- Can you save messages easily?
- Can you access new and saved messages easily?
- Does your greeting tell people who you are, what you do, and what information should be in their message? Some people even change their greeting every day, detailing where they will be and what their schedule is like.

If you're going to use voice mail, you need to have a system for recording and returning messages. Above all, make sure you return your messages as quickly as possible. As well, pay attention to the content of the message. For example, if the caller is requesting a document, perhaps that could be sent via e-mail.

Here are some tips for leaving messages:

- Don't start speaking until the machine beeps.
- Be clear, concise, and speak slowly.
- If you find that you get flustered while leaving a message, write down and practice what you're going to say beforehand.
- Give your phone number at the beginning and the end of the call.
- Let the person know when you'll be available. (Example: "I'm usually in my office from 9 a.m. until noon. The rest of the time, I'm on the road.")

Instant Messaging

Instant Messaging Etiquette

Instant messaging allows people to communicate real-time through a computer application. The upside is that it allows people to communicate quickly and effectively. The downside? It can be distracting and rude. You should have policies in place to establish when (and if) instant messaging is allowed. Like the telephone, non-work related messages should be discouraged.

You need to be careful what you say via instant messenger. Sarcasm, innuendoes, and jokes can all be taken the wrong way. Remember, the receiving person will only see your words, not your facial expressions or your body language. Keep instant messages at work short, professional, and to the point.

Controlling instant messaging is a challenge. You can simply ask employees to use messaging software only for work purposes. You can also block messaging websites. Or, if you're in a controlled network environment, you can install enterprise messaging tools so that employees can only communicate within the network.

Understanding Acronyms

Because the focus of instant messaging is quick communication, people often use acronyms. For example, someone might write "BRB" for "Be Right Back" or "TY" for "Thank You." These kinds of acronyms are acceptable, as they are polite and widely used. However, if I type, "Last nite I => 2 da movies, twas gr8!" you may have no idea what I'm talking about. (Translation: Last night I went to the movies. It was great!)

Look at the list of acronyms below. Write down what you think each one means in the space provided.

Acronym	Meaning
LOL	
BBIAB	
TTYL	
@TEOTD	
2MI or TMI	
LMAO	

ROTFL	
OMG	
BRT	
BTW	
CUL	
2NITE	
CYA	
BBL	
K	

Telecommuting

What is Telecommuting?

The world of technology opens a whole new spectrum of possibilities for workers. Consider these scenarios:

- You have hired a husband and wife, but they don't feel comfortable working in the same small office together.
- You have too many employees and not enough office space.
- You have just found the perfect employee... but they're on a different continent.

In each of these situations, the opportunity to work from home could be offered. Consider how valued you would feel if your boss trusted you enough to give you that kind of freedom! In addition to the employee feeling valued, telecommuting has these benefits:

- One less person going to work is better for the environment
- Decreased expenses for the employee (such as clothing, food, and travel)
- Tax benefits
- Better ability to balance home and work life, leading to less stress

However, telecommuting can have its downsides.

- Employee must be dedicated and trustworthy as they will not be supervised.
- Employee may find it difficult to switch from work mode to home mode (or vice versa) as there is no separation between the two.

- Less social interaction with other staff can decrease loyalty.
- Some roles are not suitable for telecommuting, such as most management positions.
- Other employees may feel that the employee is getting a free ride, harming workplace relationships.

There is also the question of distractions, and which environment is more productive.

Preparing for Telecommuting

For those interested in switching to telecommuting, ask them to write a brief document explaining why they want to telecommute and how they would plan out their work day if they were at home. Think it through: if no one else was telecommuting, would you allow this person?

Then, meet with the staff member. Ask them how they would deal with particular situations: distractions at home, needing a resource that is in the office, or getting up late. Ask how they think their job would change and what alterations they would have to make to execute their responsibilities.

If you do decide to offer telecommuting as an option, here are some things to consider.

- Make your employees accountable. Have them provide weekly progress reports, or have them check in and out online.
- Set expectations regarding work hours and productivity. Have a plan in place if these goals are not met and make sure these consequences are shared with the employee.
- Make sure employees know that this is a privilege, not a right.
- Include your employees in staff meetings and other workplace events, even if it's just a get-together after work.
- Offer the employee the same sick days/personal days as other staff. Set expectations for how these will be handled and how you as the manager will be notified.
- Communicate with the employee via instant message, phone, and e-mail; make sure they're connected.
- Make sure the employee has enough resources (see the checklist below).

A Resource Checklist

Employees who telecommute will need some or all of the following resources, depending on their role in the company. Make sure your company is prepared for some expenses!

- Computer
- Printer
- Scanner
- Laptop
- Tablet
- Cell phone
- Desk and chair
- Office supplies (pens, pencils, notepads, etc.)

- Books and other resources
- Something to keep them company (a fish is always a nice office-warming present!)

Employers often pay the telephone and Internet bills for a home office, but if they don't, telecommuters can usually claim these expenses on their taxes. Telecommuters should also keep all receipts related to home office work (including mortgage, rent, heat, lights, office supplies, and furniture) and business travel.

Other Notes

Make sure that there is a contingency plan in place. What will happen if the power, the Internet, or the phone goes out at the employee's house?

There is also the option of combining telecommuting with a typical office environment. The employee could work from home part of the time, and from the office the rest of the time. Or, work from home options could be offered on storm days or for personal reasons (say, a sick child or a doctor's appointment). You may also want to have the employee telecommute on a trial basis, or begin at one day a week and work their way up to a full-time telecommuter. Whatever your decision, make sure it makes sense for both the employee and the employer.

To Telecommute or Not to Telecommute

Scenario One

Karen and John are your team's star performers. They have been married for ten years and there has never been an issue with them working in the same office. However, Karen and John recently filed for divorce. Understandably, they no longer want to work in the same office. If you can't come up with a solution, one of them will leave the company.

If you were the supervisor, which employee would you allow to telecommute?

Why?

Scenario Two

Lisa is your company's top salesperson. She has some friends who own their own businesses, and she likes that they can set their own schedule, meaning they often work less than eight hours a day. She has approached you and asked you if she can work from home to take advantage of this flexibility.

If you were the supervisor, would you allow the employee to telecommute?

Why or why not?

Scenario Three

Your customer service representative, Sam Smith, has just welcomed a new baby into his family. His wife had to go back to work earlier than expected, and he wants to work from home so he can take care of his children and save his family money.

If you were the supervisor, would you allow the employee to telecommute?

Why or why not?

Scenario Four

Andy Winsome is your company's only software developer. For the past year, he has been working from home 75% of the time and in the office the remaining time. He has done an excellent job of managing his time, and his productivity is outstanding. His wife just received an amazing offer to relocate to the Bahamas for the next year. She will only accept if Andy can go with her. Andy has approached you with the rationale that electronically speaking, working from the Bahamas is no different than working from home.

If you were the supervisor, would you allow the employee to telecommute?

Why or why not?

Scenario Five

Your administrative assistant, Susan Jones, has just found the home of her dreams. The problem is that it's an hour from the office. She really doesn't want to add two hours to her day so she has asked you if she can telecommute.

If you were the supervisor, would you allow the employee to telecommute?

Why or why not?

Workplace Rage

Here's an easy five-step plan for preventing workplace rage.

- Before you start using any device or program, make sure you understand how to use it. Don't blow past the instructions and then get mad because you can't use it. (This goes for simple devices such as printers; a lot of printers today can do a lot of things!)
- Have patience when using the device or program, especially if it's your first time.
- If you start to get frustrated, take a deep breath.
- If things aren't working out, take a step back. Don't blame the machine; it's just following your instructions. Start from the beginning and take steps slowly, one at a time.
- If the process has been taking too long, or you feel like you're about to blow your top, step away from the task. When you've cooled off, ask someone for help. If you take this step, watch the person carefully and ask polite questions. Don't take your frustration out on them.

If you as a manager see that an employee is frustrated or angry with a device or program, it needs to be dealt with. If the employee damages the equipment (intentionally or unintentionally), it can cost the company. (A person I once worked with went through three laptop hard drives in a month. Turns out, he threw his laptop every time he got frustrated... which was a lot.) If a device needs to be repaired, it costs the company in time lost and in actual repair costs.

It's Not Working!

Introduction

So far, we've talked about how you as a supervisor can make your workplace technology-friendly and how you can use technology to make life easier for everyone.

But what happens when it doesn't work? When employees start abusing telecommuting privileges? When employees start spending all day on instant messenger instead of working? When cell phones start taking over your meetings?

First and foremost, be proactive. Have a system usage policy in place. Make sure everyone understands and signs it. It's never too late to employ such a policy or to revise it. Just remember to communicate those changes.

Next, make sure you deal with issues. If a staff member is constantly making personal calls, you could have a private meeting with him and say something like, "John, I noticed you're on the phone a lot lately. Is there an issue at home that you need time off to deal with?" This is a simple management practice, but it's especially important with technology issues to nip it in the bud.

Let's look at some sample scenarios.

Your system usage policy isn't working.

This happens a lot; a policy is put in place and then forgotten about. First, look at why the policy isn't working. Is it unenforceable or not being enforced? Do managers practice it as well? Are exceptions made? Is the policy outdated?

Once you've got an idea of the problem, look at some solutions. If the policy isn't being enforced, why not? If exceptions are being made, why? If it's not enforceable, then it needs to be changed. If it's out of date, it needs to be updated. Once the changes are made, managers should have a meeting with staff to review and re-sign it.

You've been too flexible.

You've been pretty lax, allowing cell phones, instant messaging, and web browsing. Unfortunately, you've noticed lately that communicating with the outside world seems to be the priority... not working.

The first step is to acknowledge the problem. It's never too late to fix it! Draw up a system usage policy and try to plan for the future. (Employees might be getting tablets soon? Include guidelines for those as well.) Then, meet with staff, explain why the policy is being instituted, and have everyone sign off on it.

Telecommuting has turned into a permanent vacation.

You've allowed several employees to telecommute, and now everyone wants to do it. Plus, a few of the telecommuters seem to be "Away" more than they are "Online."

Our suggested solution? Have a meeting with all staff, telecommuters included. Explain the reasons why someone would be able to telecommute and the responsibilities that they have. (They may even have extra responsibilities, such as online task tracking or progress reports.) Make sure it's clear that telecommuters work as many hours as everyone else, just not in the same location.

For the telecommuters that are slacking off, make it clear that telecommuting is a privilege, not a right. Their abuse of the privilege could result in it being revoked for everyone else. Then, set clear goals, work hours, and responsibilities. Outline consequences if these requirements are not met.

Cell phones rule your meetings.

There are a few ways to deal with cell phones. The best bet is to be proactive; once you're in the meeting, ask everyone to turn their phones off.

If you've forgotten to do this and people start getting phone calls in the meeting, deal with it right away. Ask everyone to turn their phones off immediately and apologize for not having done so already. If it's not possible to turn phones off during the meeting, participants should set their phones to vibrate and only take calls if absolutely necessary (we're talking life and death here!). They should also step outside the room to take their call.

In any meeting, it's critical for the meeting leader to have his/her phone turned off and to be free of distractions.

Employees are careless with equipment.

A keyboard ruined by coffee. A run-over laptop. A cell phone chewed by a dog. You spend half your time requisitioning extra equipment, your IT expenses are through the roof, and if you hear the phrase, "I had an accident..." one more time you'll probably go through the roof yourself.

Sounds familiar? You need to make sure employees are aware that they are responsible for their equipment. They must treat it as if it was their own, paid for from a year's worth of hard savings. You may want to outline this in a policy and have everyone sign it.

If things get too out of hand, you may have to outline who is responsible for what. If the hard drive on the laptop fries, the employer will be responsible for that. But if your dog eats your smartphone, you'll be responsible for paying for the replacement. This is a drastic solution and shouldn't be implemented without some serious thinking.

A Policies and Procedures Checklist

To manage technology efficiently, the following policies should be in place.

- System usage policy
- Device responsibility policy (may be included in system usage policy)
- Ergonomic guidelines

You'll also want the following procedures:

- Procedure for reporting system issues

- Telecommuting responsibilities
- Telecommuting progress reporting
- Device tracking system
- Requisitions (for repairs or new equipment)