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Telephone Communications vs. Email/Texting

Prepared SESCO Management Consultants

The younger generation's trend of avoiding talking on the phone has spread to employees and managers of all ages. It started with email and now with smartphones. Texting has replaced leaving voicemails and conversations now take place with our phone or fingers. Calling someone is rare in how we communicate in today's workplace.

Certainly, written communication or texting/emailing has its advantages. You can get your message out whether or not the person is available, you can respond without concern for time zones or sleep patterns, you don't have to waste time with unwanted chat and you can be very specific in your communications, getting to the point.

However, traditional phone conversations have been benefits that text and email will never overcome. The use of the telephone is still an important tool and the following are nine scenarios where a phone call greatly outweighs the written communication.

1. When You Need Immediate Response – The problem with text or e-mail is you never know when someone will get back to you. You like to think the other person is sitting there waiting for your message, but it's not always true. These days when someone sees your name on the ringing phone, they know you are making an extra effort to speak to them. Of course if they are truly busy, in a meeting, sleeping, or hiding from you, the caller ID will tip them off and you go to voicemail, which they rarely check anyway. At least now you can express yourself with heartfelt emotion.

2. When You Don't Want a Written Record Due to Sensitivity – You never know who will see an e-mail or a text. True, phone calls can be recorded...but not legally in most states without prior notification or a judge's order. Unless you are absolutely comfortable with your message getting into anyone's hands, best to use the phone for conversations that require discretion.

3. When the Emotional Tone is Ambiguous, But Shouldn't Be – Sometimes a smiley face is not enough to convey real emotion. Emoticons help broadly frame emotional context, but when people's feelings are at stake it's best to let them hear exactly where you are coming from. Otherwise they will naturally assume the worst.

4. When there is Consistent Confusion – Most people don't like to write long e-mails and most don't like to read them. So when there are lots of details that create confusion, phone calls work efficiently to bring clarity. First of all, you can speak about 150 words per minute, and most people don't type that fast. Second, questions can be answered in context so you don't end up with an endless trail of back and forth question and answers.



5. When there is Bad News – This should be obvious, but sadly many people will take a cowardly approach to sharing difficult news. Don't be one of those callous people. Make it about the other person and not you. Humanize the situation with empathy they can hear.

6. When there is Very Important News – Good or bad, if there is significance to information, the receiver needs to understand the importance beyond a double exclamation point. Most likely they will have immediate questions and you should be ready to provide context to prevent unwanted conclusions.

7. When Scheduling is Difficult – After going back and forth multiple times with a colleague's assistant trying to find an available date and time, I finally just called her. Now I didn't have to worry that the time slot would be filled by the time she read my e-mail. We just spoke with calendars in hand and completed in five minutes what had exasperated us over three days. Later that day I watched one of my foodie friends spend 20 frustrated minutes using Open Table and finally suggested he simply call the restaurant. In three minutes he had a reservation and a slightly embarrassed smile.

8. When there is a Hint of Anger, Offense, or Conflict in the Exchange – Written messages can often be taken the wrong way. If you see a message that suggests any kind of problem, don't let it fester--or worse try and repair it--with more unemotional communication. Pick up the phone and resolve the issue before it spirals out of control.

9. When a Personal Touch Will Benefit – Anytime you want to connect emotionally with someone and face-to-face is not possible, use the phone. Let them hear the care in your voice and the appreciation in your heart.

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