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In the next issue of
EDC Today:

CDISC –
Give and Take

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Improving Communications

EDC Today is an independent publication on current information and issues in Electronic Clinical Systems (ECS) strategies and technologies for the Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical (Biopharma) industry. Each month we examine topics related to ECS theory, technology, practice, or implementation.

Kirk Mousley, one of the authors of this issue, presented a session titled “Enhancing Communications in Clinical Trials” at the Drug Information Association's 19th Annual DIA Clinical Data Management Symposium and Exhibition held on February 23, 2004 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The presentation was well received and several members of the audience asked for additional information on the topic.

In this issue, we discuss different forms of business communications and try to evaluate their potential effectiveness as well as provide tips on how to improve your day-to-day business communications. While there are a number of books and classes offered on public speaking, there isn't as much offered in the way of the art of writing an effective e-mail message that so many clinical trial professionals depend on each and every day.

Introduction

In today's business world the daily onslaught of data and information seems to be rapidly escalating — ads from radio, TV, magazines, billboards, and junk mail along with e-mail spam and telemarketing telephone calls bombard each of us in ever-increasing amounts. This “unwanted noise” makes it even more imperative than ever before for people to communicate with each other the best they can and for them to strive for effective, concise, and clear messaging not only on the job but elsewhere.

Communication occurs in a variety of forms: gestures, spoken word, written prose, visual imagery, as well as sounds, music, color, lighting, odor, tactile feel, temperature and even taste. Business communications can be in any combination of the above forms (and perhaps other forms as well) but for now, let us just consider the more typical forms of day-to-day discourse shown in Table 1.



Table 1. Day-to-Day Business Communications

Form	Comments
Face to Face	Dialog, spoken; can include pictures or graphical material; visual cues including gestures; tonal component.
Telephone	Dialog, spoken, no pictures or graphical material; no visual cues including gestures; tonal component.
Instant Messenger	Dialog, written, usually no relevant pictures or graphical material; no cues or tonal components except perhaps smileys and other emoticons.
E-mail	Loosely threaded; written; can include pictures or graphical material; no cues or tonal components, except perhaps smileys and other emoticons.
Fax	Written; generally one-way and unacknowledged; can include low impact pictures or graphical material; no cues or tonal components.
Mail	Written; can include pictures or graphical material; no cues or tonal components except perhaps smileys and other emoticons.

Each of these forms of communication has its own unique pros and cons. Unfortunately for those that think they have little time to spare, it takes time to maximize the chance the communication will be fully understood and even more time to ensure it is acted upon in the manner in which was intend.

Face to face communication, perhaps assisted with visual materials, is probably one of the most effective means of communicating, and doing so on a one-on-one basis is the most effective means. The time and other costs it takes to do so, prohibits this form of communication from being used extensively, but it should be used when the situation calls for it, such as in an emergency or other crisis, business or otherwise.

At the other extreme, a quickly composed postcard, such as one bearing a change of address, mailed to many can be a sufficient way to communicate relatively brief, commonly expressed information that is important, but not especially urgent in nature. Obviously, one wouldn't expect the company CEO to telephone each and every vendor and customer with such news (however, they might wish to personally talk to very important and special customers).

So when you are deciding which form of communication should be used, consider the nature of the communication. Is it routine, such as a holiday schedule announcement? Or is it informational, such as directions on how to get to the company's auditorium for a meeting? Or is it an emergency or crisis requiring that immediate instructions be given to key personnel?

Clear communications are necessary for maximizing efficiency and productivity as well as reducing inefficiencies, unneeded costs, and even workplace stress. The more complex the task, the more communications that will be required, and the greater the likelihood one or more miscommunication will happen. Take a moment to think about the questions listed in Table 2.

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**Table 2. Communication Considerations**

What is the communication requirement?
Can communications be reduced by simplification of task at hand?
Have you applied the “Keep it Short and Simple” (KISS) principle for all its worth?
What is your goal? To inform? To gather information? To get instructions?
Who is your audience? Your employees? Coworkers? Customers?
What form of communication is best, which will you use?

An example of a common type of business communication are “task completion instructions”, that is, instructions given to someone outlining what needs to be done in order to complete a task. Task completion instructions are often difficult to communicate for a variety of reasons, one of which is using a form of communication that excludes pictures or graphics illustrating what is meant by certain instructions. Furthermore, when communicating these instructions by fax, email or mail, the recipient may have no timely way to ask questions seeking clarification.

Of course, the best situation is to not need instructions; ideally, tasks are intuitive to those selected to perform them. However, since that is often not possible, the next best situation is to cover “unusual” steps thoroughly in one or more, face-to-face, hands on training sessions. Instructions should:

- Summarize and remind people of what they learned in their training.
- Be short and direct. Long, detailed instructions generally confuse understanding.

If the instruction for a single step of a task needs a lot of explanation, then seriously consider a different way to provide the instruction or to get the step done. In this situation, a picture can truly be worth a thousand words.

For the one performing the task, getting clarification to written instructions is often difficult. It is important to provide a clear concise description of the problem or issue as well as sufficient background and context. Providing possible answers to your question, perhaps in the form of restatement or rewording of the directions or instructions, if applicable, may help you and the person you are communicating with reach common grounds for understanding. Do not assume the person you are communicating with knows or remembers everything (or anything) about what you are communicating.

We cannot overstate the importance of “context” in communication. Context can be thought of as the environment in which the communication takes place; it includes the current situational and circumstantial background of the communication, the background and experiences of the communicator and listeners, cultural characteristics, and other seemingly intangible qualities that provide a shared basis for communicating. Context can significantly alter the perceived meaning of simple statements. An example of this would be the statement “I did it.” Without context, this statement is nearly without any meaning to the listener. In a courtroom, this statement could be tantamount to a confession of a crime. At home, it could mean the simple declaration that one has taken out the trash or eaten the last of the Cheerios. Depending on the circumstances, the statement could mean one of many very different things.

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So, as you can see, it is important to take the time needed to establish sufficient context for the recipients of your communication. It may be important to ascertain that they understood the meaning you intended! In order to do this, most important spoken communications should be augmented with a written summary of the individuals' understanding of the discussion. A question and answer session may also serve this purpose. In any case, you should never assume the recipients understood what you intended to communicate, especially in critical or crucial situations where a misunderstanding could prove to be a very expensive proposition.

Forms of Communication

Although there are numerous forms of communication, we discuss only a few in detail below. This is because, as mentioned earlier, there are a number of books and classes offered on public speaking, however there isn't as much offered in the way of the art of writing an effective e-mail message.

Face to Face Meetings / Phone

One type of business communications is spoken, which includes face to face meetings and telephone calls. This form of communication can be time consuming and costly, therefore it is important that one maximizes the chance of it being effective.

Compose your thoughts before meeting or calling. Be brief, direct, and to the point, but establish a working context for what you are going to say. If you will be asking a number of questions, write them down and leave yourself enough space to write the answers you receive.

For meetings, consider whether a picture or graphic can enhance your communication, and if so, prepare one with care. When it is possible that a meeting or phone call get side tracked, prepare an agenda, publish it, and make every effort to stick to it and the issue(s) at hand.

Always use one of these forms of communication for time critical announcements. If the situation is of short notice, using e-mail, mail, or fax is not a good idea.

E-Mail

Another form of communicating is electronic mail (e-mail). The use of e-mail has become extensive and prevalent. E-mail can be very convenient. Access to mail is available in many places - work, home, and often almost anywhere via the web. E-mail allows links to relevant Web pages, documents and applications. Furthermore, e-mail allows attachments and other illustrative or supporting materials. On the other hand, e-mail has some shortcomings; it is not a dialog, it does not take place in current time (and thus loses its continuity of context), it does not convey voice tone or inflection, it requires passable writing skills in the language being used, and lastly, it is often poorly used especially when one rushes one's responses.

There are some C's to remember while writing e-mail - one should be Clear, Concise, and strive for Clarity for starters! As you practice these, one can use a larger list of C's: Conciseness, Completeness, Concrete, Correctness (i.e., accuracy) and Coherency. All of which boil down to being Careful about what you type.

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When using e-mail to communicate, always provide a complete context for your communication - please remember, e-mail is not a dialog and the recipient is not fully involved in your frame of mind. Also, some time will pass while an email is being delivered, read, answered, and returned. Do not assume you can simply resume an interrupted “give and take” session using e-mail without re-establishing context and a communicational goal.

To maximize the effectiveness of one's e-mail, one needs to use a very specific and relevant subject line. Attempt to summarize or provide context for your communication; do not place your entire message in the subject line.

Messages that are not concise or that are badly written tend to be put off until later by the recipients and perhaps simply forgotten. For most formal e-mail messages (like those going to a customer) use spell and grammar checking. For the true professional, spell and grammar checking should be used in all but the shortest of “personal notes” (and you should probably use them then too!). When in doubt about a word's exact meaning, please take the time to look it up! When an e-mail message represents your company, it should probably be proofread and/or edited before being sent - just as you should with a letter sent through the mail or via fax machine. Spell or grammar checking programs can be very helpful but they are not 100% reliable. If your message is important, find someone to proofread it.

If you are replying to an e-mail message containing questions, take the time to clearly answer ALL of the questions completely; attempt to tie your answer(s) to the question(s). Take the time to think before answering; quick replies are almost never complete and will often result in more questions. When e-mail messages are especially important and answers need to be well thought out and considered, make use of the “draft” box in your e-mail application and do not immediately send your reply - countless embarrassments would be prevented if more of us did this! Sometimes a cooling off period, a morning shower, or an old fashioned “sleep on it” provides a truly significant insight that will greatly enhance the e-mail message(s) that await in one's “draft” box.

If confusion over what is intended or what the wording in an e-mail message means continues or persists over a couple “give and takes”, stop using e-mail and call the person or talk to them face to face. Using e-mail to clear the fog of misunderstanding or confusion caused by an e-mail can become a Herculean task or the start of a never-ending vicious cycle!

Always be judicious about how much, if any, of the original message you include in your reply or forward of an e-mail. While some of the original message may be helpful to (re-) establish context or to remind the recipient of what is being “discussed”, all of it, especially if your reply is a nearly endless thread of “reply to a reply to a reply to...” is probably more harm than good.

Don't overuse the “urgent” button. Think about it...is it really? The old tale about the boy that cried wolf expresses what results from such overuse.

Use a signature line so people know how to reach you by alternate means - especially if your e-mail confuses or taxes their ability to respond. A typical signature line might include your name, title, address and phone number(s).

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Do not assume your “tone of voice” leaves your head and gets into an e-mail. Sarcasm and ranting don't belong in an e-mail in any case. They are too easily misunderstood. If you want to communicate that you are upset or thrilled with some one or thing, it is best to spell it out in words.

Sending a “carbon copy” (CC) of your e-mail to people other than your primary recipients is very easy to do. While there are no hard and fast rules regarding the use of carbon copies, or blind carbon copies (BCC) - where the recipient does not see the names of everyone to whom a copy was sent, several things should be remembered. While back in the days of letters written on paper, carbon copies were intended as “For Your Information” (FYI), with e-mail, they are often used to “spur” a response from a recalcitrant recipient by including the recipient's boss in the CC: list. Use a little forethought and care when doing this, a little sensitivity goes a long way - take care not to unintentionally fan the flames of ill will. Also, take the time to make sure the CC: list is complete but does not include people who have no business interest in the content of your e-mail. Make sure you have the right people in the To: and CC: lists! If your intended primary recipient is in the CC: list, they will think they may not need to read your email thoroughly, act upon it, or even respond!

Likewise, when sending an e-mail message, the use of e-mail groups instead of individual addresses in the To, CC, or BCC fields deserves some care and consideration - as does the “Reply All” feature commonly found in e-mail applications. Before you click on “Send”, review who will get your message! A common embarrassment is using “Reply All” and having an entire company see what was on your mind when you responded. This author recalls such a case when the embarrassed person replied saying they had nothing to wear to an impending company meeting because their dog had piddled on the pile of clothes they had left on their bed. This unfortunate e-mail message made a lasting, but certainly unwanted, impression.

Unfortunately while people working for a company have a common interest in the corporation's success, human nature being what it is means someone may be looking out for their own interest first and be looking for ways to embarrass or belittle you. So, especially in larger companies, always remember your recipient can forward your e-mail message containing ill-chosen words to someone else, including your worst enemy or even your boss.

Lastly, please use virus protection and keep it up to date. Communicating a disease, even digital ones via e-mail, is never a friendly thing to do.

Conclusion

With the daily onslaught of data and information rapidly escalating from many sources, it has become even more imperative than ever before for people in the biopharma business to communicate with each other the best they can and for them to strive for effective, concise, and clear messaging on the job.

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Maximizing your effectiveness means choosing the form of communication most appropriate for your message. Consider the urgency and importance of what you have to say while keeping things in appropriate perspective. You will need to identify and make sure you reach your intended audience. Remember to set the stage by providing a shared context among the recipients of your words. Keep your communication clear, concise and complete. Remember to use another form of communication when you seem trapped in confusion with a particular form of communicating.

Learn the pros and cons of each form of business communication; take care to maximize the strengths while avoiding the pitfalls when using any one of them. Slow down a little, think a bit; consider yourself in the recipient's shoes when composing your thoughts. Seeing the little light bulb of understanding shine is personally rewarding - avoiding costly misunderstandings and mistakes is a business' reward for choosing employees that can effectively communicate.

Readers are encouraged to share recommendations that they may have for how people can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of day-to-day business communications. We would also like to encourage feedback and suggestions to this issue, and welcome suggestions of topics for future issues.

Resources

¹ http://www.caimichigan.org/articles/12_tips_for_improving_your_newsletter.htm

² <http://www.braycommunications.com/articles/20011107.pdf>

³ <http://www.copycleaners.com/essay2.html>

⁴ http://www.homewriters.com/page_8.html

⁵ Kirk Mousley, "Enhancing Communications in Clinical Trials", Drug Information Association, 19th Annual DIA Clinical Data Management Symposium and Exhibition, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004.

⁶ <http://www.itstime.com/nov2000.htm>



Who's behind the research?

Our lead researcher, Kirk Mousley, PhD received BS and MS degrees in Electrical Engineering from MIT and a PhD in Computer Science from Lehigh University. He has been the President of Mousley Consulting, Inc. since its founding in 1993 and has directed the company's efforts in the areas of clinical database design, data editing/cleaning, document management, and submissions.

Karl Mousley received his BS in Mechanical Engineering from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and a MS in Computer Science from Villanova University. He has been a senior member of the technical staff at Mousley Consulting, Inc. since 1993. Among his significant accomplishments are the investigation, evaluation, and implementation of new computer technologies for clinical data management systems and developing strategic plans for integrating these technologies into current systems. He has extensive experience preparing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).



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