How Managers Choose Media: The Media Richness Theory and a Case Study of Computer-Mediated Communication and Organizational Performance

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Abstract
In today’s professional organizations, the presence of computer-mediated communication has added more choices to how managers can communicate with their employees. Strong organizational performance relies heavily upon successful manager-employee communication, so it is important for management teams to understand how to approach communication and what media they should select when communicating different types of messages. This paper will review the current literature on organizational communication and computer-mediated communication in the workplace, and will then conduct a case study with one company about how managers actually select media to communicate in the workplace. The hypothesis for this research is that of the managers interviewed, all will use computer-mediated tools frequently. Those who work in a more technical department will rely more heavily on computer-mediated tools to communicate, while those in communication or human resources departments will be more likely to use a mix of tools, including face-to-face. The findings will be discussed and compared to what literature suggests about how managers should communicate with employees.

Keywords: Organizational performance, computer-mediated communication, management, media
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Today’s workplace is heavily “networked.” With more than 62% of employed Americans connected to their work via some type of Internet or computer-mediated technology (Pew Internet & American Life, 2008), communication in the workplace has become more reliant on computer-based communication technology and offers multiple options for communicating. As new communication technologies emerge, members of an organization may face the challenge of determining how best to communicate. But successful organizational performance depends on effective communication, especially between managers and employees, and it is vital that managers understand how to communicate most effectively in the variety of situations they encounter. Though this may seem obvious, the clutter of workplace communication illustrates that not all employees and managers understand this. Blogs, social media tools, video chat, instant messenger and many other computer-mediated modes of communication are present in most workplaces today and people get caught up in these new communication trends, losing sight of the fact that at the end of the day these tools may not be ideal for message exchange and understanding. As D. Goleman (2000) states in his book Working with Emotional Intelligence, though everyone can talk via computer with everyone else, members of an organization often feel like no one is listening to them. People need connection, empathy, and open communication to be productive.

There is a great deal of business and academic literature that explains how manager-employee communication should take place, but does theory translate to practice? Various factors impact whether or not managers are able to communicate with their teams in an ideal manner. Furthermore, what the literature suggests may differ from what managers and their employees prefer in practice. This paper will begin with a review of the relevant literature to
evaluate what studies say the ideal type of communication is for optimum organizational performance. A case study will then be conducted with one large company to determine how its managers approach communication with the employees they manage, taking into account the presence of computer-mediated communication in today’s workplace and other factors that may affect communication choices. The paper will discuss and evaluate the findings gathered through primary research, synthesize them with the literature and provide analysis and discussion.
Literature Review

Although computer-mediated modes of communication enhance organizational communication, encourage innovation and allow for rapid exchange, various organizational situations call for different levels of interaction and understanding, which may not always be found in computer-based media. This concept is an important one to understand when managers are trying to communicate with their teams.

Why Effective Communication Matters for Managers

The premise of effective organizational communication.

Organizational effectiveness depends heavily upon successful internal communication between managers and employees. Though it may seem like a straightforward concept, understanding this is the foundation of our research. This is what Snyder & Morris (1984) set out to prove when they conducted a study based upon the assumption that “both theorists and practicing managers assume there should be a strong relationship between organizational communication and performance.” The authors evaluated both the quality of supervisors and the feedback they provided to employees about their performances to determine how that related to the overall effect of manager communication on employee performance.

They state that, “Researchers have had to make the assumption that relationships between communication and performance at a molecular level have meaningful consequences for overall organization performance” (Snyder & Morris, 1984). In their study, they gathered and presented initial data on how organizational performance and characteristics of communication related to one another. Through a survey that assessed overall effectiveness of supervisors as communicators, they found empirical support for the assumption that there is a relationship between communication and performance. For example, they learned that:
More positive evaluations of the quality of supervisors as communicators and the extent to which job-related information was shared within work groups were associated with lower workloads (number of clients served, clients served per employee) and higher levels of organizational efficiency (relative and total costs of the operation) (Snyder & Morris, 1984).

These findings demonstrate that effective communication between supervisors and employees results in efficient performance. The evidence presented from this article opened the door for other researchers to move forward and build on the concept that communication is a major component to organizational performance success. In today’s workplace where managers must communicate via various channels including computer-mediated ones, it is important to evaluate whether those tools result in effective communication between managers and employees.

This leads to the first research question: How does the presence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the workplace affect manager-employee communication, especially as CMC continues to evolve?

**Media richness theory and its role in organizational communication.**

Based on the discussion and evidence from Snyder & Morris – that organizational communication affects organizational performance – the next step to communicating well in the workplace means that managers should seek forms of communication that will lead to common understanding and employee satisfaction. In 1984, Daft & Lengel suggested that managers have an obligation to “create an acceptable level of order and certainty” and “provide a clear, workable, well defined conceptual scheme for participants” (Daft & Lengel, 1984). In this case, participants can be classified as employees. Daft & Lengel also say that organizational success depends on how well managers can clarify messages and reduce message complexity to ensure
that employees understand those messages. The authors said that this can be achieved through communicating information through “an appropriate richness,” which led them to develop the media richness theory. The media richness theory explains that each method of communication has a certain information-carrying capacity. Any medium that provides “substantial new understanding” is rich, while any medium that provides little understanding is low in richness, or lean. According to Daft & Lengel (1984), face-to-face communication is the richest form of information processing while basic written communication such as letters, memos, or documents are moderate to low in richness. Daft & Lengel (1984) say that ultimately the way to classify a medium is to determine if it provides substantial new understanding (in which case it would be rich) or whether it provides little understanding (which would indicate it is lean).

Though the article does not classify CMC tools since many of them were not yet developed, they can be classified according to the criteria listed above. Based upon the literature and how it characterizes basic written communication as lean, this paper suggests that e-mail, instant messenger, and text-based messaging are all lean forms of communication. Even within that lean characteristic, however, some forms of CMC are leaner than others. For example, text messaging and social media tools such as Twitter limit users to a certain number of characters. Very little information can be sent via these channels, which also means that the receiver’s ability to process and understand the meaning of those messages is limited. Managers, however, would have to determine what they consider rich versus lean on a case-by-case basis according to the message and the characteristics of the medium they want to use. Do they want to convey an in-depth message and achieve shared understanding, or do they simply need to share a routine message that will be easily comprehended? This is one consideration that helps managers determine whether to choose a rich or lean medium of communication. This does not say that
there is a right or wrong way to communicate; rather managers must realize that different modes of communication will result in different levels of understanding among their employees, which will affect overall organizational performance.

Russ and his colleagues (1990) acknowledge that the modern workplace is different than it was many years ago, both in communication channels available and the complexity of organizations and members’ experiences. They studied the media richness theory in more detail and how managers communicate to reduce message equivocality (ambiguity) in more modern organizations. They state that “media are selected primarily to fit message equivocality, and factors such as managerial educational level, tenure, performance, and hierarchical level may influence media selection behavior” (Russ et al., 1990). Thus while Daft & Lengel (1984) suggest that the type of message should determine the use of media, Russ et al. state that there are additional factors that may affect how a manager selects his or her medium for communication. They suggest that the level of the manager, the discipline or department in which they work, and the length of time they have been with a company may influence the modes of communication they use to communicate with employees and their understanding of the organizational communication process (Russ et al., 1990). This is important to consider in developing further research because it demonstrates that selecting a mode of communication is not as simple as knowing how clear a message should be and whether or not feedback is needed. It brings to light the various other factors in the workplace that could affect why and how a manager chooses his or her communication channel.

The article also finds that “effective organizational communication may mean selecting the medium to fit message equivocality and hence achieve mutual understanding. As equivocality varies, so too should choice of communication medium” (Russ et al., 1990). They
suggest that different managers may have different sensitivities to media and how to use them. But despite these variables and outside influences, Russ and his colleagues reiterate that rich media allow for rapid feedback and multiple cues, whereas lean media convey objective data that requires less understanding, and managers should select their media accordingly regardless of other factors that might influence their perception of how to communicate.

These studies imply that managers’ selection of communication channels depends on several factors, including the complexity of the message, the task at hand, the manager’s individual experience, and the expected outcome of the communication.

**The significance of employee satisfaction.**

While the studies discussed so far are useful in exploring how managers should communicate, it is important to evaluate how employees respond to the use of different media, particularly in an increasingly technological workplace. Understanding the employee perspective can strengthen management’s understanding of the organizational communication process. Byrne & LeMay (2006) set out to explore how satisfied employees are with communication via different media. They write that, “With businesses increasing their reliance on video- and audio-conferencing and on computer-mediated communication (e.g. email, websites) for faster and more efficient communication, it is critical that we understand the impact that these media have on perceptions of quality of communication and perceived satisfaction in the information” (Byrne & LeMay, 2006).

The authors tried to determine how the type of medium (rich vs. lean), the position of the supervisor (top level vs. immediate), and the context of the messages affected employee satisfaction and performance. They found that for job-related information, employees were most satisfied with rich media but for company information, lean media were satisfactory. For
communication with their immediate supervisor, employees were most satisfied with rich media but from top management, employees were satisfied with messages received via lean media. The reasons behind these findings, according to the authors, is because direct supervisors usually share information that is more personally relevant to employees, and so employees perceive information as higher quality when they receive it via a rich medium. From top management, employees usually receive routine information that includes company data or basic facts or statistics, and the authors say that employees perceive the quality of this information as high when presented via a lean medium. This suggests that both lean and rich modes of communication have a place in organizations today and that each is useful in specific scenarios. Managers should choose their method of communication carefully and should understand that a combination of lean and rich media is preferred. The way they choose to communicate affects employee satisfaction, which ultimately has an impact on organizational performance.

For those times when CMC is the best way to communicate, managers have more than just e-mail to choose from, suggesting that beyond understanding employees’ general satisfaction with CMC, managers should understand their employees’ preferences with specific, individual computer-mediated tools. In a longitudinal study conducted from 1997 to 2004, Sinickas (2005) evaluated employee satisfaction with the following types of communication for various tasks: electronic (Intranets, mass e-mails, and electronic newsletters), face-to-face, print, audiovisual, and non-company produced (mass media, journals and websites). The findings of this study indicate employee satisfaction with different forms of communication for different tasks, but one of Sinickas’ significant findings was that, “The implication for e-communication in business is that a relatively small percentage of employees is willing to rely exclusively on electronic sources, and only on a few topics” (2005). The author’s comparisons indicated that employees
are satisfied with CMC, but that they also prefer different types of communication for different situations. In some cases, employees preferred exclusively face-to-face discussion. As more technologies become available, it is likely that employee satisfaction may change with other CMCs and it is important that managers continue to evaluate how best to integrate these different types of communication into communication with the employees they manage. This suggests that current research could look into how attitudes toward CMC evolve as managers and employees become proficient in the use of new forms of technology and CMC.

Review of this literature raises a second research question: Given that traditional forms of communication (e.g. face-to-face meetings) are defined as “rich” and computer-mediated forms are classified as “lean” according to the media richness theory (keep in mind that this does not include new social media tools), do managers recognize that lean media result in different levels of understanding and satisfaction than rich media?

**Computer-Mediated Communication in Today’s Workplace**

Today most members of an organization are familiar with basic CMC channels including e-mail, conference calling, e-newsletters and instant messaging services. Organizational culture has adopted CMC as a common form in the workplace and many organizations continue to add new media as they develop. One cannot assume, however, that familiarity with technology results in the successful use of it in the workplace. Variables such as training, situational influences, and past experience all affect the successful use of CMC in manager-employee communication.

**CMC as a benefit to organizations.**

Several studies argue the positive effects of CMC in the workplace and how it improves organizational performance. Santra and Giri (2009), for example, conducted a literature review
to build a case for expanding the use of technology in Indian organizations. The article states that, “Computers as communication tools play an important role in sharing, discussing, and negotiating knowledge through computer networks. In addition, CMC has opened new horizons for information creation, storage, and accessibility.” Additionally, Tucker & Westerman (1996) suggest that introducing new organization forms and management technologies into the workplace provides organizations with an “internal strategic competitive advantage.” They argue that if organizations utilize new organization forms and management technologies, their communication systems will be more effective and will result in a competitive edge over organizations that do not. These and other advantages have led to widespread use of CMC in organizational communication especially at the managerial level.

**CMC challenges and the need for proper training.**

Still, competitive advantages are not solely responsible for organizational success. Often CMC use presents some challenges, especially for busy managers. In his article entitled “Make Yourself Heard,” Hoen (2006) analyzes the overload that occurs from a constant stream of e-mail use at work. He states that, “The concept of information overload is becoming a real nightmare for many executives. People don’t know how to switch off – or feel they can’t – and so are always in touch, no matter what time of day or night” (Hoen, 2006). E-mail is one type of CMC and arguably the most common form, according to Hoen, that reaches people constantly. This exemplifies how various types of CMC have complicated the workplace. If employees and managers feel overloaded from e-mail, they cannot complete tasks effectively or give situations the proper attention they require. Hoen reiterates the fact that very few people in the workplace have been instructed on how to properly manage e-mail and therefore many do not know how to use it effectively (2006). Managers and employees alike should strive to understand proper use
of e-mail and how it should be used in conjunction with other forms of communication (i.e. richer forms) to ensure messages are delivered effectively and overall performance is improved rather than hindered.

It is possible that information overload as a result of e-mail pushes managers and employees into a cycle where they continue to rely upon e-mail to convey one message quickly so that they can get to another. In competitive organizational environments, people are often pressed for time and this is one way CMC has both helped and inhibited the workplace. Busy schedules, therefore, are contributing to managers’ increased dependence on lean, quick forms of communication such as e-mail or instant messenger, and this form of communication sets a norm for employees and how they perceive workplace communication. One expert writes that, “Face-to-face sessions give people the opportunity to ask questions, offer opinions, and give and receive feedback – unique advantages over even the best print publications, video programs and e-mail messages” (Howard, 2006). Ultimately the article argues for managers to maintain a balanced use of face-to-face (rich) communication and e-mail (lean) or various types of CMC as a way to maximize effectiveness and offer employees proper instruction on how to communicate well. This will allow managers to accomplish their goals and set a precedent for successful internal communication.

**Situational influences and how they affect media richness.**

One study challenges the validity of the media richness theory and how employee perception and other situational factors influence CMC use more than the “richness” of it. Van den Hooft and his colleagues used a meta-analysis to understand how e-mail is used in the workplace. What they found was that employee perceptions of e-mail affected their use of it. Users who were more adept at using e-mail and whose colleagues used it more frequently as well
perceived e-mail as a useful, rich medium that could help them complete a wide range of tasks, especially when they needed to communicate from different locations. They therefore used e-mail for both rich and lean communication (van den Hooff et al., 2005). This provides yet another layer to the use of technology in the workplace, suggesting that use of a medium is not always straightforward and that situational influences affect the way members of an organization communicate. In this case the situational influence is the richness employees perceive in a medium, suggesting that perhaps traditional “rich” versus “lean” classifications as proposed by Daft & Lengel may not indicate the same meaning to everyone and may make media selection more difficult for managers.

This concept is further illustrated in the discussion of instant messenger (IM) as a potentially rich CMC tool. IM is a common CMC tool used in the workplace. According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, one in five employed adults used IM at their office in 2008, while 41% use IM either at work or for personal use (2008). That number has likely grown since then. Shaw and his colleagues evaluated the use of IM in organizational communication in a longitudinal study by applying the presence awareness theory. They suggest that some forms of technology, including IM, allow for Presence-Aware Communication (PAC), which is defined as, “Any form of mediated communication in which users are directly aware of the online presence status of their communication partners.” The authors suggest that PAC will provide cues to users that would enable them to make decisions and ultimately communicate more efficiently (Shaw et al., 2007). Thus their argument suggests that although IM is a communication technology, it is not as lean of a form of communication as other CMCs due to its “presence awareness” feature. Though it is used for basic, brief message exchange, it allows users to continue the exchange until a message is fully understood. This suggests that IM
becomes richer because of this feature and communicates more information than traditional types of CMC, making IM a rich form of what other scholars characterize as a typically lean medium.

The authors tested this idea among employees. In their study they introduced IM to employees who had not used it before and found that employees saw it as a useful tool and it made them feel more productive when communicating with co-workers. Additionally, with the introduction of IM, “E-mail and telephone usage decreased significantly and instant messaging increased significantly as the channel of communication people were likely to use first to initiate communication with colleagues” (Shaw et al., 2007). Since there is an added element of presence awareness to IM, it has become an effective part of organizational communication. The study does not say, however, that IM replaces other forms of communication (rich or lean), but rather is a way to initiate communication and determine if someone is available or not for further communication.

The literature that has been explored brings a great deal of light to the concept of how managers should communicate with employees, how the media richness theory can be applied to guide this type of communication, and how employee satisfaction with the way managers communicate with them affects their understanding and ultimately their performance. It also highlights some of the channels by which managers communicate in today’s workplace. Table 1 on the following page summarizes and synthesizes the findings from this literature review and indicates which type of media is the best fit for different messages and situations. Assume each task is being initiated by a manager.
### Table 1

**Suggested Media Managers Should Use to Communicate Specific Types of Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Message Characteristics</th>
<th>Feedback needed?</th>
<th>Suggested Medium</th>
<th>Why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing new policy to team</td>
<td>Objective, unfamiliar, formal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Face-to-face training meeting (rich)</td>
<td>Mutual understanding necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning with team</td>
<td>Subjective, in-depth, formal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Best to achieve shared understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting an employee evaluation</td>
<td>Subjective, in-depth, personal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Rich medium enables feedback and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating contact</td>
<td>Objective, simple, brief</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>IM or phone call (somewhat rich)</td>
<td>Sender can gauge availability this way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming session with team</td>
<td>Collaborative, subjective, informal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Face-to-face, e-mail, IM, other tools (rich/lean combo)</td>
<td>Lean/rich combination best for team work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification on a task or project</td>
<td>Brief, straightforward</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>E-mail or phone (lean with some rich feedback)</td>
<td>Depends on the depth of the question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering a question for a routine assignment</td>
<td>Objective, straightforward</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Routine info can be communicated with a lean medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a company news update</td>
<td>Objective, information provision</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>E-newsletter (lean)</td>
<td>Lean media preferred for company info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following up on status of a project</td>
<td>Objective, mutually understood</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Part of routine communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alerting team to overload</td>
<td>Personal but straightforward</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Manager can share one fact with several people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In today’s organizations, communication will continue to evolve. Interpersonal communication is essential to organizational cohesion, and managers should take steps to ensure that their use of CMC in the workplace is conducive to strong interpersonal connections and communication (Housel & Housel, 1986). The various ways managers should approach CMC as discussed in this section imply that several factors will determine what medium is appropriate in what situation, and that organizations can and should properly train employees on the use of CMC in the workplace in order to maintain strong performance and understanding within the organization. One should keep in mind, however, that today’s workplace may not allow for the “proper” communication in every situation. Distance, size of company, geography and many other factors exist that may impact the way managers choose to communicate with their employees.
Methodology

The research conducted for this study is based upon the hypothesis that although managers most likely realize that rich forms of communication should be used in combination with lean ones, they still will select lean forms of communication (specifically computer-based media) more frequently than rich ones (i.e. face-to-face) for most interactions with employees. We believe this because a majority of adults in the workplace are heavily connected – 62%, according to the 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Project – and therefore have easy access to computer-mediated communication tools. Workplace computers today are equipped with e-mail access, Internet access, and possibly an instant messaging system and other CMC tools. Managers have easy access to technologies that can make communication easier and more rapid, they are often familiar with them, and as more methods of CMC have emerged it has become common to utilize some form of CMC for communication with employees.

Intervening variables may affect managers’ media selections, such as the department in which a manager works. For example, those who work in communication may be more likely to utilize a mix of rich and lean media because they are aware of the importance of shared understanding in messages and feedback, while those who work in more technical departments will select computer-mediated media more frequently because they are comfortable with those tools and well-versed in how to use them. The age of the communicator may also be a factor in the way a manager uses computer-mediated media, with younger managers being more likely to show familiarity and fluency with CMC tools. In some cases, a manager may come from another company that was either very CMC-savvy or not at all, which may affect the way they communicate in their current environment. Finally, the amount of training a company provides for its managers on how to communicate is a factor that could affect how they choose to
communicate. If a company provides uniform training, all managers may communicate a certain way for various situations. The research conducted will explore how managers communicate with their employees (specifically via which media), how they view communication in the workplace, and what variables affect the way they communicate. For the purposes of this research, this hypothesis only applies to U.S. companies.

In-depth interviews were conducted with five senior level managers from the Washington, D.C. office of a major U.S. defense contracting company. The interviews were conducted in person between February 16, 2010 and March 4, 2010. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Managers were interviewed from the following departments:

- Communication and Public Relations (two interviews)
- Human Resources (one interview)
- Information Technology (one interview)
- Digital Communications (one interview) (digital communications manages the company’s online tools and virtual identity – intranets, website etc.)

Although informational interviews will not be representative of managers throughout the country and among different industries, this in-depth process will provide a case study for how managers communicate with employees and, more importantly, will provide reasoning behind why they communicate the way they do. Furthermore, in-depth, face-to-face interviews are a traditionally rich form of communication that will provide a great deal of depth, detail and understanding about managers’ communication processes, which seems fitting given the scope of this project (face-to-face interviews are a rich form of communication). With managers from communications and PR, human resources, and information technology/digital communications, we are able to see if patterns exist between departments and how each may differ.
Results

The in-depth interviews conducted reveal that there is more than one approach to the way managers choose certain media to communicate with their employees. Consistent with the media richness theory, managers reported an understanding that certain messages are better communicated with certain media depending on the complexity of the message and the level of understanding. Generally managers will communicate in whatever way they feel will result in that understanding, when possible. Even when barriers exist that affect what type of communication a manager is able to use, subjects reported careful thought as to how they could best communicate with their employees. Interestingly, all managers reported a preferred method of communication and had concrete reasons for those preferences.

The overall findings were significant because with the ease that CMC presents for managers to help them keep up with a busy workday (tools are rapid, accessible, and instant), we expected interview subjects to report frequent use of CMC. The managers with whom interviews were conducted reported less use of e-mail and other CMC tools than expected, and the answers they provided about their media selection demonstrated an understanding of how communication affects overall organizational success. They also reported a genuine knowledge of their employees’ personal communication preferences. Several major themes surfaced:

- Managers place a great deal of value on face-to-face communication with employees and reported an understanding of how it enabled richer interactions and communication.
- Each manager reported using a mix of media when communicating with employees, depending on what they believe the situation calls for or what their employees prefer.
- Managers understand how important communication with their employees is to organizational performance.
Managers find that e-mail is best used for certain situations but may not be appropriate for others.

Managers reported that they are familiar with and utilize instant messaging (IM) for specific tasks.

The company uses other computer-mediated communication tools in addition to e-mail and instant messaging, and managers reported on how those are used (AT&T Connect, Microsoft Outlook, videoconferencing).

Managers reported several barriers – such as geography, traveling employees, and company changes – that influence the way they select media to communicate.

Managers place a great deal of value on face-to-face communication with employees and reported an understanding of how it enabled richer interactions and communication. Managers in this company find face-to-face communication essential to their relationships and communication with employees for a variety of reasons. Though we hypothesized that this would vary between departments, results show that this is consistent across all of them.

According to the manager of communication, face-to-face communication is valuable when discussing large projects or brainstorming because it conveys importance.

I need to be clear that the person on the receiving end understands a project and is able to ask questions and I can feed them more information based on their body language or the vibes I’m getting from them that they’re not clear. I can’t get that over the phone and I certainly can’t get that over e-mail. And plus I think that sitting down with somebody conveys the importance of the message versus just shooting off an e-mail.

Not only does she feel that face-to-face will allow for conversation, verbal and nonverbal cues, but she also believes that it conveys the importance of the task at hand to her employees. The
manager of public relations (PR) reported that even with employees who are off site, face-to-face matters for significant situations such as annual reviews. He said that for a recent round of performance reviews he had to do, he drove to both New Jersey and New York so that he could conduct the reviews with each employee face-to-face. For situations that carry weight (according to how the managers perceive them), managers will make an effort to sit down with an employee and discuss things in person, and when an employee is asked to sit down face-to-face, they will understand the gravity of the situation at hand.

Face-to-face communication is also important to managers for in-depth situations such as new project discussions where complexity might exist and understanding is necessary to achieve a common goal. Often managers want to see or hear their employees’ reactions and so they will choose to meet face-to-face. For example, the HR manager reported that “part of the feedback process is a loop” and communicating in a way that is richer, like face-to-face or on the phone, allows managers to understand if the employee is receiving the message and understanding it. She said, “Some of that you can do verbally but there are human elements of how a person reacts that you need to see.” The manager of digital communications reported similar feelings about face-to-face communication for large projects.

I feel that when trying to strategize and when something requires brainstorming and more in-depth thought process that I believe requires more attention span, it is easier to do that around a table where you can see people’s faces and know that you have their full attention span versus just a conference call.

The manager of information technology reported a similar experience. He said that, “We usually get together at some kind of an off-site [meeting]. The reason I do that is because you can have richer communication and more interaction and I also get to read the body language better.”
Although he is a manager in a more technical department and is likely is more adept at CMC than his colleagues, the IT manager, too, values face-to-face communication.

Finally, in some cases, face-to-face communication is valued because it enables social interaction. As one manager said, “I don’t value face-to-face communication because I think I’m a pretty effective communicator without face-to-face. But I value the face-to-face interactions. I enjoy talking to people.” Though today’s workplace offers a variety of CMC tools and opportunities for people to communicate without actually seeing each other, managers of this company demonstrate a strong preference for face-to-face communication because it allows for depth, greater understanding of significance of a situation, and social interaction or relationship building with employees.

According to the manager of communication, “Communication is not limited to the words you use. It includes body language, it includes tone, and gestures.” These findings show that regardless of department, managers value face-to-face communication and the ability to see how their employees respond to information, what they say or do, and how they can enable shared understanding.

Each manager reported using a mix of media when communicating with employees, depending on what they believe the situation calls for or what their employees prefer. Having a wide array of tools for communication leads managers to approach communication with their employees in a variety of ways. Although a manager may prefer one medium, his or her employee may prefer another. This results in varied uses of CMC and face-to-face communication in the workplace.

In response to the question about how a manager would answer an employee’s question about a daily task or ask a question themselves, managers said that if an employee chooses one
particular mode of communication, they will respond in kind. For example, the manager of PR said that one of his employees prefers to initiate contact via IM: “So he IMs me all the time and…we’ll IM back and forth. But whatever mode works for them. I prefer face-to-face, on the phone.” Although he would rather talk face-to-face or on the phone, he will engage with his employees in the same manner that they initiate communication with him because it means his employees are actively involved in the message sending and receiving, and he also has no reason to begin a transaction in another medium if he is already engaged. Similarly, the manager of communication said: “It depends on how the question comes in. If they call me I’ll answer the question on the phone, if they e-mail me I’ll probably answer them over e-mail unless it’s a little more complex. Then I’d probably pick up the phone and call them.” This shows a willingness to communicate with an employee via the medium they prefer, unless there was some ambiguity or need for clarification. In that case we see that she would move to a richer medium that enables more feedback and discussion. There also may be a situation where a manager has a preference but circumstances might prevent them from selecting their preferred medium. Each of these responses indicates that though preferences exist, managers do not always communicate consistently via one medium. It also shows that when some ambiguity or uncertainty exists, a manager will likely move to use a richer medium.

In certain instances, more than one medium will be used to communicate within one situation. In the case of discussing large projects, one manager reported that her preference is to have a face-to-face meeting but she will often have a pre-meeting by phone or e-mail to give people the opportunity to prepare for the preliminary face-to-face meeting. Although the official discussion may occur face-to-face in a conference room, initially other messages will be exchanged regarding the situation through more concise, lean media to share basic details.
What we can conclude from these findings is that with so many media available (computer-mediated and otherwise) managers may try a variety of approaches to exchange messages with employees. While they may prefer one medium, they will also use another if their preferred channel is efficient or straightforward. They may even put their own preferences aside to use the media that their employees respond to better.

**Managers understand how important communication with their employees is to organizational performance.** Whether it is a result of company training or expertise developed over a successful career, every manager interviewed reported a solid understanding of how important communication is to enhance employee performance and the organization overall, with three out of five managers (HR, IT, and PR) stating that communication with employees is “critical.” As one manager said, “It really all boils down to how effectively we are communicating what we expect from people in order to get performance at the level we need.” This sums up the general sentiments of the other managers, which ultimately shows that in this company, communication is valued and viewed as a way to maintain success and strong performance. One manager from the communication department reported similar feelings: “[Communication] is very important. It’s the life source of whether we succeed or fail as a team. If we’re not communicating, then we’re operating in a vacuum and there’s a whole list of things that could go wrong.” There is no variation or doubt across departments in this case that communication with employees is essentially the key to positive performance.

Regardless of how a message is communicated, each manager understands that there must be an exchange and that there must be shared understanding. Without strong manager-employee communication, there cannot be strong performance. As Snyder & Morris (1984) said, “Both the theorists and the practicing managers assume there should be a strong relationship...
between organizational communication and performance.” We know from our literature review that theorists believe this, and through these findings from the research we can also agree with Snyder & Morris that practicing managers believe in the relationship between organizational communication and performance as well. This principle applies regardless of what type of media managers choose.

Managers in this company find that e-mail is best used for certain situations but may not be appropriate for others. Again, the results for this section did not vary between departments. All managers discussed ways in which e-mail use was both effective and ineffective, and all of them reported using it.

According to the HR manager, there are times when she believes e-mail is not the best way to communicate. She stated:

E-mail for investigation [and] data gathering purposes feels like it takes less time but actually ends up being long and taking more time because of the follow up process. You can go back and forth with e-mail and the e-mail itself can get misinterpreted and itself can cause a situation.

The information technology manager agreed that e-mail is not always suitable, especially if it starts to get too confusing.

I have a three strike rule. If I get more than three e-mails or more than three IMs about something, I usually take it to the phone because I don’t have all day to sit here and go back and forth on stuff. It’s like okay, something’s missing, we gotta have a higher level, higher fidelity conversation.

Perhaps the approach he has toward e-mail – his three strike rule – demonstrates a deeper fluency of it than some of the other managers, which makes sense since he handles IT.
On the other hand, e-mail can be useful for certain situations, such as when things need to be documented or should be on paper for easy reference. In response to a question about sharing exciting team news, the digital communications manager said that he would use e-mail because, “It’s easier to memorialize those kinds of thoughts in written words. They have the effect of being permanent especially if you’re celebrating good news or praising somebody for their work; that’s something that can be kept as a record or a memento.” In a similar vein, one manager said she uses e-mail when she wants to copy other managers on a message that praises an employee for a job well done. She also states that for alerting employees about her status, “I would fire off an e-mail. It’s just easier. I have seven to ten people so it wouldn’t really be time efficient to call each of them, plus then they have it for reference in their e-mail.” Finally, the manager of HR suggested that when things need to be documented for legal purposes, e-mail is definitely an effective medium. When managers feel the need to document something or share information with others in a time-efficient manner, e-mail allows them that capability and encourages employees to keep things for their records. This is clear across the board.

What we can conclude from reports about e-mail use is that the managers spoken with are e-mail-literate and do believe it has its specific uses in the workplace, but that they make efforts not to overuse it, especially in situations where it adds to ambiguity.

Managers reported that they are familiar with and utilize instant messaging (IM) for specific tasks. The company provides an instant messaging system for its employees, and some of the managers discussed their use of IM for various tasks. In most cases, managers reported using IM to gauge the availability of someone they wanted to initiate communication with. The IT manager reported that he uses IM for its presence awareness feature (PAC), a
feature discussed in the literature review (Shaw et. al, 2007), which demonstrates his use of IM for its richer characteristics.

I usually check IM because at a glance it will tell me a.) if they’re at their computer and b.) it checks against their online calendar, gives me red-yellow-green whether or not they’re available, and I can literally just move my mouse over the little icon and it tells me…when their next free slot is.

Similarly, the manager of HR stated that she will use IM if she wants to just ask an employee to come in to her office to talk. This is interesting because it shows that these manager uses IM not to convey significant messages or tasks, but to gauge whether or not employees are available or initiate contact to move to another medium where something can be discussed in greater detail.

For simple status checkups, one manager said she will use IM if it is just a quick, “Hey can you follow up with someone” situation, while another manager said that if something is urgent and he needs to get a hold of an employee immediately, he will IM them. According to what each manager has reported about their use of IM, it is clear that IM is used specifically for quick communication – whether to gauge availability, ask a simple question, or tell someone there is an urgent matter and they need to come talk to their manager. While in one case – when the manager uses the PAC feature – IM provides a richer experience, mostly it is used for its lean characteristics.

The company uses other computer-mediated communication tools in addition to e-mail and instant messaging, and managers reported on how those are used (AT&T Connect, Outlook, videoconferencing). According to the managers interviewed, AT&T Connect is a popular tool the company uses in addition to e-mail and IM. The HR manager explained that AT&T Connect is a phone system that allows people to call in to a teleconference
or video conference and share documents live. She said that there is also a feature where people can see someone raising their hand, and another where people can send in questions to the live conference without interrupting the person speaking. Essentially this is a multimedia tool that is used frequently in the company, and managers said that they use it primarily for team meetings and strategizing for new projects when they are unable to get their entire team to one location.

Also frequently mentioned was Microsoft Outlook, which is an office e-mail and scheduling system used by many companies today. Not only do managers use this for their e-mail, but they use it to maintain their online calendars and look at the calendars of their employees. The Outlook system also allows users to send meeting requests. One manager says that it is becoming more and more difficult to rely on reaching people via phone, so she will often check her employees’ Outlook calendars or send a meeting notice to schedule time to talk.

The other managers reported similar use of this CMC tool, especially to find out when someone was available even before they scheduled a meeting or sent out a meeting request. This tool allows users to check on someone’s status or schedule without even initiating communication. However, as the HR manager said, this does not always work because not everyone keeps their calendars online.

The manager of IT is the only manager who reported on use of videoconferencing other than the video features enabled by the AT&T connect system. He says that he thinks videoconferencing is a rich method of CMC because it enables actually seeing someone and conversing with them, and he reported that, “We’re trying to get more video.” Since many employees in this company work together from different locations, it is a tool he believes would enrich communication in the company. When evaluated according to the media richness criteria, videoconferencing offers both the features of a lean medium (computer-based, accessible and
fast), and the features of a rich medium (allows for verbal and nonverbal cues, can see body language, allows for elaboration), providing important features of each type.

While some managers are comfortable with these new technologies, others are not. It seems that this specific company does encourage the use of technology as a way to enhance communication, but managers are resistant to embrace the CMC tools as the only way to communicate. The IT manager says that CMC is second nature and that he can work anywhere he has a laptop, Internet connection, and a cell phone, while the manager of digital communications said that he does not frequently use IM and other CMC platforms, but he is getting more comfortable with the idea. The manager of communication said, “I tend to use all the tools that are out there that we have access to inside the workplace and outside the workplace.” Overall managers indicated that their company provides many tools and is looking to expand and provide additional ones, but that they each have their own comfort levels with these tools and use them accordingly.

Managers reported several barriers—such as geography, traveling employees, and company changes—that influence the way they select media to communicate. Managers reported that the way their organization is structured complicates the way they communicate with their employees. It is a large, national organization with more than two hundred locations, and teams work together across offices all over the country. Geography is a huge barrier and may cause managers to select a medium that they otherwise would not use for communicating a specific type of message. For example, whether to share team news, talk about a new project, or evaluate an employee’s performance, managers cannot always see their employees face-to-face. The HR manager stated, “I would love to be able to run over every chance when there’s a good thing and say, ‘Hey this great thing happened.’ The reality of our daily work life is we’re in
meetings, people aren’t available, or they’re on travel. It’s a distributed world so people don’t all sit together.” This indicates that though she may prefer to communicate one way, geographical barriers prevent her from being able to use a certain method of communication.

Another way geography affects communication is with personal employee issues and reviews. One manager stated that she believes this task should be conducted face-to-face, but she said that, “Given the fact that the employees who work for me are all over the map, sometimes it can’t wait for us to be together. It needs to be done.” In that case she says she will make a phone call to speak with her employee, which still allows for conversation and clarification. When face-to-face is not possible, most of the managers interviewed mentioned the use of the phone as a second choice.

The manager of digital communications reported that the company had recently been experiencing changes and that, “Being in a state of transition can cause ambiguity for certain people’s roles and responsibilities.” This means that when there is ambiguity in the workplace and with employees and the roles they fill, a manager may need to consider his or her communication more carefully than they would otherwise. With transition comes additional complexity on top of the already present need for shared understanding, so for this manager transition means he has to be more careful how he communicates and via which medium.

Finally, along with a large organization comes the need to have either employees or managers traveling frequently to different offices. The communication manager stated that since she’s traveling and in meetings so often, by the time she is able to sit down at her laptop it’s after hours. Therefore she is not only out of the office, but also pressed for time:

I rely on e-mail too much and it’s mostly because, not to make excuses, but I’m sitting in meetings from 7 till 5 and by the time I get to my e-mails or get to think about projects or
assignments that I need support on, it’s generally after any normal person is sitting down and having dinner with their families. Barriers may occur simultaneously, on an occasional basis, or they may be a constant part of working life (such as employee geography). These barriers play a major role in the media a manager selects when communicating with his or her employees, demonstrating that although a manager may know there is an ideal way to communicate, they may not be able to use that option.

Summary of Findings

Earlier in this paper a table was presented with findings from the literature on what media managers should use for specific tasks. The questions asked during in-depth interviews reflected these same tasks discussed in the literature review so that we could compare theory to practice. Table 2 on the following page is structured similarly to Table 1 but this time it summarizes the findings from the in-depth interviews about what media managers choose for which tasks. All information in the table is based upon what managers reported about why they use the medium they do for specific situations.
Table 2

Managers in practice: Media selected to communicate specific types of messages to employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Suggested Medium</th>
<th>Chosen Medium</th>
<th>Why chosen?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing new policy to team</td>
<td>Face-to-face training meeting (rich)</td>
<td>Face-to-face meeting or teleconference (rich)</td>
<td>Want to achieve mutual understanding but employees are at different locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning with team</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Want to see body language, verbal and nonverbal cues; in-person conveys importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting an employee evaluation</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich)</td>
<td>Enables clarification; allows for feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating contact</td>
<td>IM or phone call (somewhat rich)</td>
<td>IM or Outlook calendar (somewhat rich)</td>
<td>Sender can gauge availability or check when someone has free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming session with team</td>
<td>Face-to-face, e-mail, IM, other tools (rich and lean)</td>
<td>Face-to-face or teleconference (rich)</td>
<td>Prefer feedback and team interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification on a task or project</td>
<td>E-mail or phone (lean with some rich feedback)</td>
<td>Face-to-face (rich), IM or e-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Depends on employee preference and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering a question for a routine Assignment</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Depends on how employee asks question</td>
<td>Managers respond in-kind to the way employees initiate communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a company news update</td>
<td>E-newsletter (lean)</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Allows managers to share same information with everyone at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up on status of a project</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>Face-to-face, phone, IM, e-mail,</td>
<td>Varied between managers for different reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alerting team to overload</td>
<td>E-mail (lean)</td>
<td>E-mail (lean) or in-kind response</td>
<td>E-mail notifies everyone quickly; in-kind response is convenient and employee is already engaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The research conducted for this study shows that there is little discrepancy between what academic literature suggests and how managers in this specific company actually choose to communicate with their employees. We sought to learn if theory and practice would line up and wanted to find out how managers approach communication with their employees. When evaluated against the criteria that the literature set forth, this company has skilled communicators in management roles and the managers understand the significance of choosing media. They may not think about it academically, but they are aware of how communication affects the bottom line and overall organizational performance. We cannot say that this study determines that there is one right way to communicate internally, nor would the specific approaches discussed in our findings work for every company. However, this case study does exemplify an organization that engages in effective workplace communication in a way that reflects theory and parallels previous research.

Our hypothesis was accurate in suggesting that managers would use CMC tools for various tasks, but the hypothesis that media selection would vary significantly between departments did not prove to be true. As the results show, there were substantial similarities across all departments. Communications managers, as we thought, frequently use face-to-face communication with employees because they are aware of the feedback process, but they were not the only managers to use rich communication when possible. It was our belief going into the study that the manager from the IT department would rely heavily upon CMC; in fact, he was enthusiastic about the opportunity to meet with his employees face-to-face or talk to them via videoconference or on the phone more so than he reported wanting to use CMC. This suggests that proficiency with CMC does not indicate a more frequent use of it. It may be that the level of
experience a manager has is the key factor in how they communicate (rather than their area of expertise), or it could be that the type of company a person works for affects their approach to manager-employee communication. Whatever the case, the fact that managers’ media selection does not vary significantly between departments in this company is a major finding. We can conclude from these findings that upper level management in large companies overall are likely skilled in various types of communication, despite of their area of expertise, and will make different choices in the various situations they encounter.

Finally, we were surprised to learn that the managers interviewed for this study were so focused on the importance of face-to-face communication with employees, even for tasks that are typically easy to understand via a lean medium. Especially because so many instantaneous modes of CMC are available to them, we did not hypothesize that managers would prefer talking face-to-face with employees about tasks and projects. It was expected for large projects, but not for routine tasks and status updates. This could have to do with a social norm or standard that is present in the company, or it could be a result of camaraderie between employees and their managers at this particular organization.

From the data gathered we can theorize that the way management approaches communication has set a norm for this organization that may be similar among other large organizations. In this particular organization, the norm is frequent use of media that allow for rich interaction. Since most managers reported a preference of rich, face-to-face communication and as a second option, video or voice conferencing when face-to-face communication is not possible, we believe that both employees and managers in this organization perceive the communication norm to be use of somewhat rich, interactive media to exchange messages, and that more lean types of media are used for straightforward, fact-focused communication.
The foundation of this research was the concept that organizational communication affects employee performance, and we sought to understand if this was true not only in theory, but in practice. From what we have learned, it appears that theory and practice do match up. We would like to suggest that ultimately, it is not the media through which managers communicate that results in understanding, but the commitment to achieving shared understanding and engaging in clear communication that results in strong employee performance. While these findings teach us more about how various media are used today and what capacity each medium has to convey information, the bottom line is that managers who understand the importance of communicating clearly with their employees will also understand how to properly use each type of communication channel that exists, no matter how basic or how advanced. The focus is on the manager-employee relationship, and when a manager recognizes the importance of their communication with their employees, the performance will most likely be strong, regardless of what approach a manager took to achieve that performance.

**Research limitations and suggestions for future research.**

It is important to address some major research limitations that are present in this study. Firstly, the small sample size – five managers of one company – is not representative of all industries, company sizes, demographics, and managerial experience. It is a case study to add depth to the findings in the literature, and results cannot necessarily be applied to all types of companies. The case study may be representative of other large companies with various functions, so these findings are applicable to other organizations with similar characteristics.

We did not collect demographic information, such as age and gender, which could have some affect on the way an individual approaches communication. This is relevant because age may affect communication choice; a younger person could be more computer-savvy than an
older person. We did not collect information on how long each manager has been with the company, which could also influence the way they choose to communicate. For example, if a manager has been with the company for ten or more years and they have grown with the company while face-to-face communication has been the norm, they may be more likely to communicate with employees face-to-face. A manager who has been with the company for six months may have their own approach, which could include more reliance on CMC.

Demographic data could have provided additional explanation on why managers communicate with employees in specific manners.

Another limitation is that the interview subjects volunteered to participate. They were not randomly selected, so their willingness to participate in this study shows they may have a stronger interest in workplace communication than some of the other managers in the company and they may consider it a strong suit of theirs. Their answers may reflect more of what they think is proper, and not necessarily what they always do, because they could have been trying to report in a way that would contribute positively to the research.

Next, employees were not included in the research, which is a major component to understanding how satisfied employees are with the media through which their managers communicate with them. Without the data telling us whether or not employees are satisfied and/or feel they achieve shared understanding through the media a manager uses in different situations, we cannot determine if the managers’ approaches are completely effective. This is an important element that future research can address.

Finally, this study looked at a limited range of computer-mediated media, including e-newsletters, e-mail, instant messenger and online calendars. We did not address social media and many of the newer technologies and how these new CMC tools may actually be evolving into
rich modes of communication. Social media is a huge part of CMC in today’s workplace as the number of social media users continues to grow. Two years ago, 46% of adults were using social networking sites, and that number is growing rapidly (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). Just 8% were using social networking in 2005, so we can project that the 46% has grown since 2008. With interactive features, pictures, video, voice tools and multimedia applications, social media and newer forms of CMC may eventually replace a majority of face-to-face communication for large, national companies. This may ultimately do away with the concern that CMC does not allow for feedback and face-to-face interaction. Future research should look into how the media richness theory could apply when newer CMC tools are commonly used in organizations and how social media may actually redefine what “lean” and “rich” mean.
Conclusion

While the research limitations have a slight effect on the overall conclusions one can draw from this paper, we have discovered a great deal from this research alone, which can be useful to other companies in understanding the manager-employee communication process. This research shows us that within this company (and probably many others), there is fluency with the most common CMC tools. The way interviewees referred to different media and their varied use of each demonstrates a general ease and shared understanding among the organization of what these tools are and how they are used. Despite the availability of technology in today’s workplace, managers do value the face-to-face interaction and the communication they have with their employees. They see it as a way to enhance organizational performance and also as a way to develop relationships with those employees they supervise. Ultimately, the research conducted proves that even as CMC continues to evolve and high level managers become “networked,” people still crave in-person interaction and communication, and managers want to see their employees face-to-face. They want to receive verbal and nonverbal cues and see body language so that they can reach genuine shared meaning and mutual understanding. Sometimes this is possible over a computer-based medium; sometimes face-to-face is required. We know from our research that today’s organizational communication relies on both rich and lean media to exchange messages that result in shared understanding and strong organizational performance, and even when new types of CMC are introduced, this will most likely hold true.
References


Appendix A

In-depth Interview Questions

1. I’m going to give you several scenarios that you might experience and I would like you to think about how you typically approach the communication for these tasks. What mode of communication you would use to communicate with an employee/team of reports for each of the following tasks and why?
   - To ask a question about a routine assignment
   - To plan and strategize for a new, large project
   - To provide constructive criticism and offering feedback of an employee’s project
   - To gauge availability/initiating contact (to find out if an employee is at their desk at a given moment, if they are available, etc.)
   - To share exciting team news
   - To follow up on the status of a daily task
   - To discuss a personal employee performance issue
   - To introduce a new team policy
   - To alert your team that you are in “overload” mode and may not get to everything they need
   - To answer a question to clarify an assignment

2. How would you describe your personal outlook on workplace communication and its significance, specifically in relationship to communicating with the employees you manage?

3. What do you feel your strengths are in communicating with those you manage?
4. Do you have anything you’d like to improve in the way you communicate with the employees you manage?

5. Does BAE Systems provide its managers with guidelines on how to manage and communicate internally?

6. Do you value face-to-face communication in today’s workplace? Please explain

7. Would you consider yourself adept with technology and computer-mediated forms of communication?

8. What variables do you think influence why you approach communication with employees the way you do?
JL: Just answer in detail as much as you want to share for the following questions. I will do about six interviews for this case study. I’m going to start with one question that is a multi-part question. I’m going to give you several scenarios that you would experience in day-to-day work life, and just let me know how you would approach the day-to-day communication for those tasks with the employees you manage.

Interviewee: So we’re focusing on just the employees I manage?

JL: Yes, not between you and others at your level. So how would you communicate to ask a question about a routine assignment?

Interviewee: Something that I had already assigned?

JL: Yes

Interviewee: I would typically do it – well let me preface by saying I as well as most people prefer face-to-face. I’m in a unique situation; it’s probably more common today than in the past. I have 4 employees who work for me. Two sit right here with me and two sit at other sites. The other sites happen to be southern NJ, and the other one is in upstate New York. So that presents challenges because I don’t see them on a regular basis; I don’t see them weekly or daily. I tend to talk to them daily – one more than the other – and so the two individuals here we just do it face-to-face. I have often shared especially with the two here because they are seasoned professionals. But basically, I don’t need to know what you’re doing every minute of the day…you need to know what you have to do to get the job done so you go and execute it. I’m only going to check up if, you know, ‘hey I haven’t heard about that project in awhile, how’s it going?’ Most of the people that work with me on a daily basis will say “John I’m working on
this project, here’s where it’s at.” I also don’t expect from most of my people, because we’re so busy, I don’t expect a lot of reports. I hate reports. The weekly, the monthly…we get enough of that from the people above us. We do a bi-weekly call within the function [communication]. So I might ask someone face-to-face, how’s project X, how’s project Y? One of them is very good, when we get on the phone he’ll typically have a laundry list of things he wants to ask me. The other fella loves IM. So he IM’s me all the time and says, “hey I have this great idea” and we’ll IM back and forth. And I tend to call the ones who are remote. But whatever mode works for them. If they want to pick up a phone in call me, you know. In a previous position here I took calls on weekends, I took calls at 11 o’clock at night from reporters…I’m very open to that. I’m willing to talk to people at whatever time of the day. I prefer face-to-face, on the phone.

**JL:** Great, thank you.

**Interviewee:** But that being said, with the two staff here and the two off site, where we have to, we’ll do it electronically, via e-mail if it’s necessary. They may be off traveling, and if they send an e-mail I’ll send an e-mail back. Respond when you can.

**JL:** Okay, next scenario: for planning and strategizing for a new, large project. How would you approach communication in that situation?

**Interviewee:** Well I think the approach there is you gotta get the right people. If it’s the people who report directly to me, we’ll do the same thing. If it’s the two people right here, I’ll say let’s convene and we’ll get a conference room and convene. We may have to get the two others who are remote on the phone…but let’s strategize and talk about this on the phone. For your information, the two individuals who are remote, we just went through an annual review and that’s important to do face-to-face as well. Evaluate the performance of 2009 and look ahead to objectives for 2010. And again, this was relatively easy. I drove to New Jersey and did that
gentleman’s review with him face-to-face, and from there drove to New York and did his face-to-face. And obviously with the two employees here I did that face-to-face as well. Um, now when I had an employee far away there were times when I had to do things over the phone but I prefer to do those face-to-face.

**JL:** Okay. And how about to provide constructive criticism or feedback for a project that an employee has been working on?

**Interviewee:** Same thing. Again, face-to-face. If I have to give feedback on a performance whether it’s positive or negative, well especially if it’s negative, um, I’d rather do that face-to-face. I had one employee who worked for me at one time who had a problem getting here on time and every time I needed to talk to her about it I didn’t see improvement, and when I went to take the next step, she was never here. She is no longer with the company either, but you know that’s…a couple times I had to talk to her on the phone. Her job didn’t require her to travel. But if it’s a performance issue as opposed to something positive…I like to do the positive face-to-face too when I hear someone in the company say “hey you know, Bob did a great job helping us out with that effort, just want to let you know we value his contribution” then I go directly to them and say “hey so and so just paid a nice complement about you, just want to let you know and thank you for doing that.” We don’t do enough of that. I think in general.

**JL:** That meaning face-to-face?

**Interviewee:** The pat on the back, what we call the “atta boy.” I don’t think people realize how far that goes with employees. I can’t speak for every employee in the world, but I think if you’re trying to motivate an employee, giving them that positive feedback motivates them. Sure a few extra shekels in the paycheck motivate them too, but I think nothing motivates employees more than positive feedback. Saying “hey you did a great job on that project, it
worked really well.” My philosophy is that people come to work because they want to make a positive contribution to an organization, and by giving them positive feedback I think that satisfies that need, that you let them know that the work they do is valuable and that it’s contributing to the success of the organization. I think that’s really important in employee communications. I’ll share with you, and I suspect if you talk to any organization you would find that employees want to know that the work they’re doing is valuable. And we probably don’t do that enough, I don’t care who it is. Managers probably don’t do that enough. We probably could do a better job of that as managers and supervisors of employees.

**JL:** Okay let’s see. To gauge availability or initiate contact, basically if you’re trying to find out if an employee is available or at their desk to talk to you. How would you initiate contact or what would be your approach?

**Interviewee:** It’s a very simple “hey you got a few minutes? We need to talk about this project or we need to get an update on this.” Obviously the others who are remote I’ll typically call them and say “hey.” That said, with the technology, you know if I’m going do as you indicated before “okay we’re going to start a project…let’s meet and get the others on the phone” I might initiate a meeting notice, especially if I have to have two people call in. And the beauty of the technology is the fact that you can – and I don’t know how familiar you are with Outlook – but you can check people’s calendars and say “I’d like to do the call at one o’clock but oh, he’s already got that blocked off.” So from that perspective I might send out a meeting notice based on what I perceive as their availability. And not everybody keeps their calendar online; I’ve done that and gotten someone who wasn’t available at that time. There are times when “you got a few minutes” doesn’t work in every situation.
JL: And how would you communicate to share some exciting team news with everyone on your team?

Interviewee: I would probably again with two people here do it in person…well here’s what I would do. I’m very sensitive to sharing news whether good news or bad news with my directs at the same time. So if I have to share it with them at the same time, and sometimes I do want everyone to hear the same message, I will basically say “I need to speak with you all today at 4 o’clock, and here’s the teleconference number.” My goal is to share information at the same time with the four individuals and to share the same message. So that’s why we had to use the phone.

JL: Alright we kind of covered this when I asked you about answering a question about an assignment, but this next one is how you would follow up on the status of a daily task. So, still kind of along the same lines.

Interviewee: Same thing. Getting back to an earlier question, something popped into my mind…I don’t know if your research looks at this but one thing I’ve learned over 25 years with this company is I think it’s really critical that people want to hear news from their direct line supervisor. I think there’s some credibility that goes along with that. I think people want to hear news, whether it’s good, bad etc. because that’s the person they work with the closest and they’re in a position to trust that individual. So that’s why I think it’s incumbent of us to do a better job communicating with our employees.

JL: So we covered the question about communicating information about employee performance already so I’ll skip that. How about to alert your team that you are in “overload mode” and you may not get to everything they need you for?

Interviewee: How do I do that?
JL: Yes

Interviewee: Again, I’ll do that face-to-face or by the phone if I have to. If I’m traveling, it might be an e-mail so that I can quickly put people on alert. If I’m traveling and it’s midnight or something I’m not going to call someone to say “hey I can’t get to this.” Um, usually what I’ll do is if someone asks of me “hey I sent you something, can you review it and get back to me?” I will usually…they may call me or come around the corner and tell me they sent me something and I’ll say “okay I’ll take a look”. But I think if I understand your question and it’s an “I can’t get to you right now” it may have to be an e-mail or it may have to be the phone or some other way. I told you about the individual who loves IM so I’ll search through his e-mails looking for something and think, “Why can’t I find it?” and I’ll realize because it was IM it’s gone, it’s history.

JL: Okay I guess we’re out of time so the one thing I’d like to wrap up with if possible is how do you describe your personal outlook on workplace communication and its significance, specifically in relationship to communicating with the employees you manage?

Interviewee: It goes back to what I shared with you about sharing information directly from me to my employees because I believe hearing something from your direct line supervisor is paramount to good organizational communication. That being said, there are times where because of the nature of the business, you can’t always share things. Sometimes there are things I can’t share with my employees at a certain level. My own personal philosophy is “I’ll share with you what I can when I’m authorized to share it. So if I know about a potential reduction in the force, for example, I’ll share that with you when I’m allowed to share that with you. There are timing issues with that.

JL: And what channel would you use to share that type of information?
Interviewee: Again, that’s got to be face-to-face. With the two remote employees, I’d probably put the two here into a room like this, put the other two on the phone, and say “hey I just want to make you aware of something that’s going to happen here that will affect the following functions.” In a previous role I did a lot of work with mergers and acquisitions and at that time there were certain cases where you couldn’t share that with employees. So I’m kind of off the “I’ll share with you what I know, when I know it and when I can communicate it with you.” There are sometimes things about the business where you know information and you know you’re going to have to share it with your employees but at that point you’re not sure, and it has to be based upon when the organization is ready to make those announcements. Was that helpful?

JL: That’s very helpful, thank you for your time.

Interview 2 of 5 (Manager of Human Resources)

JL: Hi, thank you for meeting with me today. As I mentioned I am doing a research project on organizational communication and how managers communicate with the employees you manage. I have a few in-depth questions I’d like to ask so just answer in as much detail as you can. I’m going to start with one question that is a multi-part question. I’m going to give you several scenarios that you would experience in day-to-day work life, and just let me know how you would approach the day-to-day communication for those tasks with the employees you manage.

Interviewee: Okay.

JL: Okay so the first scenario is what form of communication would you use to answer an employee’s question about a routine assignment?
Interviewee: It depends because if the employee is local I would, my personal style would be to do a quick call. For instance my secretary sits right around the corner so actually I could even get up and walk over but typically I would call. Even in that case, if she’s not available to answer the phone I’ll send her an e-mail and say “give me a buzz when you have a minute.” I have employees that are not here, I have one that sits in New York so in that case I would send an e-mail. We have one-on-one meetings so if something can wait, I start a list and keep it for the next meeting. So it depends. If it’s something that has a time urgency to it I’ll use a phone call or e-mail.

I find that e-mail, I’m somebody who is slow to embrace e-mail as my primary [mode]. I prefer to talk to people because there’s nuances to communication and e-mail is a one-dimensional tool. It can become two and three depending on how you use it but it’s, I’ve had this happen where I’ve managed junior HR staff and I’m training and mentoring them. I’ve had them come in and say – when I’ve asked them about getting information and seeing if they understand data – I’ve asked them a question and they say “No I didn’t ask that but I’ll go back and ask them.” Well it turns out they didn’t talk to the manager, they e-mailed the manager. And my experience, especially in Human Resources when we’re doing the kind of work that we do, is that e-mail communication for investigation, data gathering purposes feels like it takes less time but actually ends up being long and taking more time because the follow up process. You can go back and forth with e-mail and the e-mail itself can get misinterpreted and the e-mail itself can cause a situation.

I did that this morning, in acting for someone else. I reluctantly sent someone an e-mail because I knew I didn’t have time to call but I set up a meeting to follow up on the e-mail because it’s a sensitive topic. And he’s an e-mailer. He’ll e-mail me until the end of the day and I
don’t want to let that happen because this is a discussion that needs a little bit of emotional management, and he’s got some anger about an issue and I’m trying to help him through that and doing that by e-mail which is one-dimensional, I find that ineffective. E-mail in my mind can exasperate and can extend critical incident management. I don’t know if I gave you more than you wanted but it’s what I’ve discovered in managing people. It’s very effective when it is just a quick statusing process, when you’re giving some direction to folks, because I think it gives you the opportunity to step back before you hit send if you’re doing it right, and look at what you said and ask “does it make sense?”

Now this is more about assigning work, you haven’t asked me that yet but I’ve got a project for our CEO at the corporate level and I want to get that right so that we don’t have to have people redo it. We have two weeks to get it done. It’s a bit sensitive, what she’s asking for feels a little bit invasive for people so when I send it out I want to have the right tone. I want to have the request be very clear so that when they work on it what they send back is exactly what we need. So e-mail can be really useful in giving clarity and having a structure to what you want back, and of course everything about deadlines, etc. And it’s a good way to say “yeah I did send that to you” when they say “no I never got that.” I’m not big on the CYA piece of e-mail, but it does help and it also gives people the ability to manage their own schedule. You send that out to them with a timeframe and then they can manage it. They can go back to it, they can put it to a project file, so I think there is some benefit to that also.

JL: Okay thank you. And how would you approach the communication to plan and strategize for a new large project?

Interviewee: For a new large project my preference is to have an initial face-to-face, possibly to have one pre-meeting by phone or e-mail to give people the opportunity to think
about the meeting. You could send out some pre-work for the meeting and then if it’s significant project, I think a significant project needs face-to-face. I think follow up meetings can be by phone. And sometimes that works out, sometimes it doesn’t. We do a lot of meetings now through ATT Connect and phone meetings with sharing documents live.

**JL:** Can you explain ATT Connect?

**Interviewee:** ATT Connect is basically a phone system that allows people to call in and then share documents, and there’s a whole technology behind it where you can see on the screen if someone’s hand is raised, people can send questions in while on the conference call without interrupting, and there are also other things that you can do with it that we haven’t explored yet. People can vote on a call, you can gather instant feedback from people, so there are some really cool tools out there.

**JL:** What would you use to communicate with an employee to provide constructive criticism or feedback on a project they have done for you?

**Interviewee:** Again it would depend on how critical the feedback is. Um, my preference is if I can do face-to-face I will. If it’s particularly critical feedback I would at least do it by phone. If it’s say vendor feedback or feedback relative to a process and I am sending it to a process manager who doesn’t report to me then I’d send something in writing. But to the people who report to me I prefer phone.

**JL:** If you are trying to gauge availability or initiate contact with someone you manage, find out if they are at their desk or if they can come chat with you, for example, how would you do that?

**Interviewee:** Um, if they’re local I might use instant messaging. More frequently though I use Outlook and schedule time. If it’s a quick call again I would IM or pick up the phone and
say “can you come over?” IM worries me a little because it’s sort of like when – you probably can’t imagine a world without e-mail but I remember when, I can actually picture myself sitting at a desk with a screen in front of me realizing that all my mail was now coming out through the screen. And what hit me that day, I can literally picture it, is that people are going to expect significantly faster responses on everything, and that was just e-mail. Well then we went to Blackberries and we went to other methods of almost constant communication sources, and now we’re at IM. It really boils down to setting expectations for people. If it’s really an emergency, you let people know how you can be reached. Not everything is urgent or an emergency, and so in order to have a normal life where you balance work response to life response, you really just have to manage your own response. More often I think people assume they’re expected to respond instantly, when really I don’t think people expect an instant response. I think some managers might, but you can manage that. You could spend all day, I could seriously be busy all day just by watching e-mails come in and responding to everything that comes in. So you’ve got to manage your time, and I’m cognizant of that, I’m saying that in the context of how you manage people and how people communicate with people. Because I don’t want to be calling my secretary every five minutes for status, that’s why we now have a scheduled one-on-one, so that I capture things in a clump instead of constantly asking her. So I try to do it that way unless it’s time critical.

**JL:** Okay. And how many employees do you manage?

**Interviewee:** Me personally I manage two and a half and then I work with, I interface with and am responsible for seven VPs and several hundred people that are reporting to them. I also provide HR support for HR.

**JL:** Alright so how would you share exciting team news?
Interviewee: Probably via e-mail.

JL: And can you explain why?

Interviewee: Again if it’s team news, my preference would be face-to-face…one of the reasons I’m in human resources is because I like people and I like hanging out with people. I would love to be able to run over every chance when there’s a good thing and say “hey this great thing happened.” The reality of our daily work life is: we’re in meetings, people aren’t available or they’re on travel… Again it’s a distributed world so people don’t all sit together. We’re not co-located as a function. So if it’s something that’s great news and you want to share it, and you want to share it quickly, e-mail is the way.

JL: Okay. Thank you. And you sort of touched on this but to follow up on the status of a daily task? You kind of touched on this but if you don’t mind reiterating.

Interviewee: Yes. Again daily tasks depending on the urgency, might be a quick e-mail or call. If not I usually check in on the status of things during weekly one-on-ones.

JL: Alright and then to discuss a personal employee performance issue?

Interviewee: That would typically be in person. I have had to fly to get to people when there are performance issues. I’ve had to relay information to people for our PRP (performance review process) in person. I had my employee actually come here. Definitely do that in person.

JL: And why do you feel that way?

Interviewee: Well part of the feedback process is a loop, right? And again, e-mail is one-dimensional so in order to get feedback I have to share something with them. And it’s not just hearing what they say, it’s seeing how they actually are feeling about it. Are they really understanding it? Is the message being received? And some of that you can do verbally but there are human elements of how a person reacts to it that you need to see. I have done coaching too,
quite a bit over the phone, and so most of the people I mentor are not here and we will talk over
the phone. They’ll ask me for feedback on a project or on a personnel issue or a conflict they
may be experiencing and so there are these pieces where it’s the best we can do and we will have
those conversations by phone. But I will tell you that works only if you’ve established a personal
relationship with somebody and there has been some face-to-face contact with them in the past,
and they know you and they trust you. Obviously you have a trust relationship that’s been
established. In my job sometimes I have to do employee relationship work, at this level, and so I
had a case where we were going out to basically terminate an employee. And while I had met
this individual once, it was just not something you could do by phone. But when you’ve got an
established or trusting relationship, I would never terminate somebody without clear cause via
phone. There are occasions where we have done that because it was in everyone’s best interest to
keep that individual out of the workplace but those kinds of critical elements are done face-to-
face.

**JL:** Okay thank you. And to introduce a new team policy?

**Interviewee:** Depending on the impact of the policy if it’s significant, we may actually
do some kind of a brown bag or group meeting to roll it out, again using that ATT Connect so we
can show the policy and take questions. If it has minimal impact it may just be something we e-
mail out to people for flow down, we send it to the HR VPs for flow down, so it depends.
Sometimes if there’s enough impact we have a whole communication plan around the roll out of
a new policy of something significant. For instance we had a significant change in a benefits
program this past year, and we worked with an outside consulting firm to think about “how can
we manage this so we don’t disrupt the work force significantly?” And they do a really fine job
of that. They have multimedia communication sent to the home, e-mail sent to work, Frequently
Asked Questions, opportunities for people to have face-to-face interface with an expert, so if it’s a big change, there’s a whole comms plan that gets put together. We did something with this particular roll out that I’m talking about where we actually trained the managers on how to approach this. We gave them a context for the change so that they were prepared to roll it out. [Our VP] had mentioned that communicating change is always one of the biggest challenges, and so we actually have a whole training process in terms for how we help people communicate change. The comms organization has created this template for how to communicate change. You have to have managers really well-prepped to do this effectively.

Here’s a quote: “Word of mouth recommendations are 13 times more powerful than mass media communications” and this comes from Sultan at Harvard University, I want to credit that. But you know when you understand that, and it’s especially important to remind ourselves of in this technology age, you know the manager-employee communication ethic still needs to be very strong. Especially when you’re communicating change. When you’re just doing statusing it’s not quite as critical, when you’re giving feedback it’s critical, when you’re trying to change – and critical feedback is part of changing behavior, so it’s really part of that change process.

**JL:** Okay thank you. Just one more scenario: How would you communicate with your team to alert them that you’re in “overload mode” and may not get to something that they need? How would you communicate that message?

**Interviewee:** I guess it would depend on who’s asking for what. Typically that wouldn’t be sort of a grand statement. Usually that response would be in response to somebody asking me for something. And I’d probably have to let them know that my timing in terms of response may be limited. And so I would be honest with them and figure out what they need and see if there was another way they could get what they need. It’s about prioritizing too and so if their priority
is not mine at the time, I might suggest other ways for them to keep moving forward until I can get to it um and that sometimes helps so that they stay moving forward and I catch up later. Or I might suggest that they go see somebody else or whatever it might take. If it’s critical for something they’ve got to do and it’s time sensitive then I may have to put what I’m doing aside and help them.

**JL:** And how would you share that message?

**Interviewee:** Again if it’s not something particularly critical and they ask via e-mail then I might respond via e-mail. If it’s sensitive and I’m going to let them down then I am going to pick up the phone and do it. And when I pick up the phone, even that’s kind of changed. It’s really scheduling time. It may be a half hour conference call in Outlook because I am finding more and more that you just can’t rely on a phone call to get through in the timeframe you need. So if you really need to get to somebody, and there is a message that needs to get through right away, you get on their calendar. My own personal time prioritization is the person that’s scheduled to see me is usually top priority. The phone ringing is usually second, and e-mail is usually third.

**JL:** One more scenario, and again we sort of touched on this but if you could just reiterate for me: To answer a question to clarify an assignment?

**Interviewee:** Again I would say it depends on how they ask me the question. So if they ask me the question in an e-mail, I’ll probably respond in e-mail unless it’s too complicated. I can tell you I’ve stopped and started that because when I’ve tried to create the response or tried to provide clarity, I realize we need to have a conversation about it. Sometimes they ask a question and I’m not sure what it is they don’t know, so that’s that one-dimensional aspect again. But if it’s a pretty basic question I’m going to respond in e-mail. If it’s more complicated I might
send them a request for further clarity, and we might have a couple of e-mail passes at it. If we still don’t have it clear then we’ll make a phone call or schedule a teleconference.

**JL:** Okay. That’s it for that series of questions. How are you on time right now?

**Interviewee:** I’ve got another five minutes.

**JL:** Okay I’ll just ask you one more question then if that’s okay. How would you explain your personal outlook on workplace communication and its significance, specifically in relationship to the employees you manage?

**Interviewee:** The root of all good and the root of all evil is communication. It really all boils down to how effectively we are communicating what we expect from people in order to get performance at the level we need so it starts with communicating objectives and clarifying roles and responsibility, follow up for support as well as status. It’s important to keep people informed so that they know what’s going on in the company. It’s absolutely critical to any change process so you really need to have a plan and how to introduce change. We talk about culture as a key element of business success so if you shift culture, another change element, you’ve got to communicate multiple times in multiple ways with a feedback loop so that you can find out whether it’s having effect. I feel communication is an absolutely critical element of effectively managing people. And the whole reason we have corporate structure is to achieve some end goal or deliverable to our shareholders. We have to deliver value and we only do that through the people we have. And it’s just like putting toast in a toaster. If you don’t put toast in the toaster and push the buttons the right way, you’re not going to get toast and so people need to have guidance, training, clear objectives in order to produce the toast. Get the deliverable. Without that, it’s truly the engine that runs the enterprise. I think sometimes managers get caught up in the day-to-day activities and so busyness overtakes good communication. And we are very
committed to checking ourselves, so every two years we do a full employee opinion survey and in between we do an abbreviated employee opinion survey looking at key elements of the business like ethics, like effective communication and we did find that the breakdown was at the local level in terms of communication. We found that we put some measurements on managers’ time that in essence was starting to look like it was working against good communication, so we changed that. Not only did we change that but we held managers accountable by scoring them on how effectively they were communicating and started to make communication as valuable an activity as any of those other activities that were keeping them busy. So you actually have to treat communication as a process just like you treat designing a new widget or doing business development work or whatever your function is. You have to treat communication as a value added exercise and again, measure it and get the feedback and then go back and tweak it and make sure you’re doing it right. I think this company has done some good work to do those things. To check in with the employees and say how are we doing with it? We’ve changed things over the years and we’ve tried to make it better.

JL: Okay, well thank you. I think that’s all we have time for so we’re finished.

Interview 3 of 5 (Manager of Communications)

JL: So I’m going to begin by giving you a few different scenarios and basically the idea here is to provide as much detail and description as you can since it’s an in-depth interview. I’m just going to give you some scenarios that you might experience in a day-to-day work situation and I’m not sure that they’ll all be applicable but just answer to the best of your ability.

Interviewee: In my current situation?

JL: Yes, in your current situation in the job you have now.

Interviewee: Okay.
**JL:** I want to know how, in these situations, you would communicate with the employees you manage in terms of the channel you’d use, and that type of thing. So if you were to communicate to ask a question about a routine assignment that was already assigned to an employee, how would you go about that?

**Interviewee:** If I were communicating on a current assignment that’s already been assigned. Um, it really is based on the circumstances and the type of information I’m looking for but I rely on e-mail quite a bit. That might be an area I need to change, but I do fire off e-mails more quickly than I would pick up the phone. But again it would depend on what I’m looking for. If I’m looking for a status I’ll probably fire off an e-mail but if I need to brief someone on my leadership team I’ll call the individual and get a more in-depth background and status on it.

**JL:** Okay and what about a situation if you were to want to start planning and strategizing for a new large project with your team or one of your employees, how would you approach that?

**Interviewee:** Definitely face-to-face.

**JL:** And can you explain a little bit more about why?

**Interviewee:** Well just because I think that’s, you know, if you’re putting together a strategy that’s a very critical point of a project and to make sure we’re using the best use of our time and our resources, it’s critical that the assignment is clear. You kind of prioritize your ways of communicating based on the priority, or I should say you select the means of your vehicle based on the priority of the project. If this is just a quick “hey can you follow up with someone” I’d shoot an IM but if it’s a large project that’s important, I need to be clear that the person on the receiving end understands a project and is able to ask questions and I can feed them more information based on their body language or, you know, vibes I’m getting from them that they’re
not clear. I can’t get that over the phone and I certainly can’t get that over e-mail. And plus I also think that sitting down with somebody conveys the importance of the message versus just shooting off an e-mail. If I were to call a special meeting and ask people to travel and meet me in a conference room, that sends a message that “this is important and I need to pay attention.” It’s high priority versus if I were to just fire off an e-mail saying “hey when you get a chance, give me a call, or can you do some research for me” or whatever it might be. But I think calling people together and getting them in a room conveys that it’s important.

**JL:** Thanks. And what would you do in a situation where you needed to provide constructive criticism or offer feedback on an employee’s project?

**Interviewee:** Well, do you want the proper way or the way I actually do it?

**JL:** What you usually do.

**Interviewee:** Well I do both. I’ll do e-mail sometimes, but it depends on the relationship I have with the individual. Um, if it’s someone that I don’t see on a regular basis or work with on a regular basis, and I need to offer them some feedback that might not be favorable, I’d definitely pick up the phone and call them. We’re all over the map from where my direct reports are so it’s not always easy to sit down with them to do that. But sometimes if I have a very close working relationship with somebody – in fact I just did this last week with a guy that works for me…he was working with one of our multimedia designers and they missed the mark and I fired off an e-mail telling him so – but that’s someone that I talk to on such a regular basis that I feel like that’s okay, but it probably isn’t, so…

**JL:** Okay. Got it. Okay and the next one is how would you communicate or what channel would you use to gauge availability or initiate contact, so if you just need to ask a quick question or you want to find out if they’re available what would you do?
**Interviewee:** Probably would, it depends if I have my Blackberry I’d do e-mail, if I’m at my computer I’d use IM.

**JL:** How about to share exciting team news?

**Interviewee:** Well I have a bi-weekly staff meeting. Depending on the news itself, I’d prefer to tell everyone together and given that we have a set time to meet, you know, I’d like to respect everyone else’s time and utilize our designated time in a meaningful way and I may save it [news] for that opportunity so everyone can hear it at the same time. But I think again it really depends on what the news is. If it was really, truly exciting news that everyone was waiting to hear about I’d probably call people together.

**JL:** And what about discussing a personal employee performance issue?

**Interviewee:** In person. Or if it’s something that needs to be addressed immediately it would be over the phone. Again given the fact that the employees who work for me are all over the map, sometimes it can’t wait for us to be together. It needs to be done. My style for that is on the spot performance reviews – I don’t like to wait the six months. If I see something good I’ll address it right at the time. So, if that’s the case, sometimes I just have to call the person. I can’t necessarily wait to do it in person.

**JL:** Sure, sure. And do you mind explaining why you would choose face-to-face or phone as opposed to something else?

**Interviewee:** Sometimes I’ll do – I’ll alter. Again it really depends on what the message is. Sometimes if it’s a way to go “great job,” I’ll fire those e-mails off because it gives me a chance to copy members of the senior team as well, and I know how effective that can be with some people, some personality types. Other people, they want to talk on the phone, they want to hear it live. So sometimes it depends on the message, sometimes it depends on the person.
**JL:** Okay thank you. Alright, and for the next situation, how would you approach the communication if you were alerting your team that you’re kind of in “overload mode” and you may not get to something they need you for?

**Interviewee:** I probably would fire off an e-mail. Yeah generally I try to keep them posted on my travel plans. For instance, I’m leaving today for a business trip and I’ll let them know that this is where I’m at, and if you need to reach me, the best way is X.

**JL:** And what’s the reasoning for that approach?

**Interviewee:** It’s just easier. I have a team of 7 to 10 people so it wouldn’t really be time efficient to call each of them, plus then they have it for reference in their e-mail.

**JL:** And the last situation, this is kind of something you touched on but go ahead and explain your answer again, um, but to answer a question if an employee asks you a question about an assignment they have?

**Interviewee:** It depends on how the question comes in. If they call me I’ll answer the question on the phone, if they e-mail me I’ll probably answer them over e-mail unless it’s a little more complex. Then I’d probably pick up the phone and call them.

**JL:** Okay. So that’s it for that question. Now the next thing I’d like to ask you is how would you describe your personal outlook on workplace communication and its significance specifically in relationship to communicating with the employees you manage?

**Interviewee:** I just want to make sure I understand the question. So what’s my personal take on communication?

**JL:** Just in terms of the team you manage and how that communication is significant.

**Interviewee:** Okay. Well, given that I’m a professional communicator I’d say yes it does matter. It’s very important and it’s the life source of whether we succeed or fail as a team. If
we’re not communicating, then we’re operating in a vacuum and there’s a whole list of things that could go wrong from people missing strategy, not understanding strategy and not working toward the strategy, so then you have a bunch of people doing things in their own little vacuum that don’t contribute to the larger goal and then as a whole function we’re ineffective. My boss should fire me if that were to happen. So I believe it’s critical to everything that we do.

**JL:** Thanks. And what do you feel your strengths are in communicating with those you manage?

**Interviewee:** I guess I think what I do well is develop a positive working relationship with the people that work for me. I’d like to believe that everyone that works for me feels comfortable calling me, feels comfortable coming to because of the relationship I’ve been able to build with them. And that all comes down to communicating. You know, being honest, being open, being approachable…so I think because of that and because of my natural skill to want to communicate with people, that creates an environment where meaningful relationships can be developed.

**JL:** Do you have anything you’d like to improve in the way you communicate with your employees?

**Interviewee:** Yeah, I think I need to get better about picking up the phone. I rely on e-mail too much and it’s mostly because – not to make excuses – but I’m sitting in meetings from 7 till 5 and by the time I get to my e-mails or get to think about projects or assignments that I need support on, it’s generally after any normal person is sitting down and having dinner with their families. I’m still sitting on my laptop working, so you know in lots of cases it’s just timewise. But I do definitely need to get better about doing that.
**JL:** Okay these next questions are kind of obvious, I feel like you’ve already covered them but I’m going to ask them anyway. Do you value face-to-face communication in today’s workplace and can you explain that?

**Interviewee:** I do, and again number 1, communication is not limited to the words you use. It includes body language, it includes tone, gestures, I mean you can’t get a full message from somebody over e-mail or IM, and even sometimes over the phone it’s hard to read people and so you can’t get the full and complete message. I’m sure you’ve heard this before but the words you use is 50% percent of the message and everything else is what contributes and what is lasting with people. So first and foremost I think it’s valuable because of that, because of all those other elements that are included. Secondly I think again, in the world that we live in and the crazy hours that people work and the workloads that we have, to get people together in a room tells me, whether or not it’s coming from my boss or coming from myself to my reports, it tells me that this is important. It’s so important that I’ve asked you to take time from your day and I’m taking time from my day to sit in a room and convey this message to you. So it sends a very strong message.

**JL:** Okay and would you consider yourself adept with technology and computer-mediated forms of communication?

**Interviewee:** I would like to think so. I tend to use all the tools that are out there that we have access to inside the workplace and outside the workplace from the social media standpoint and how I keep up with friends and family, and how my family and friends keep up with me.

**JL:** Can you explain any other tools you use in the workplace besides e-mail and instant messenger as you’ve discussed?
Interviewee: We really don’t have anything set up for employees right now (aside from those). I think the company has been really slow to adopt these new tools and before we even, I shouldn’t say we because I didn’t lend to the problem, and I don’t think anyone did. I just think we are a very large organization and as much as we would like to be and strive to be a company that’s nimble and agile, we just aren’t. And so to adopt these new forms of social media, as easy as we’d like to think that it is, isn’t. And so we’re scratching at the surface, we’re very far off. We have different pockets of communications teams that are embracing these tools um, but from a companywide approach it really isn’t working. Or I shouldn’t say it isn’t working but it hasn’t been adopted as part of our culture. But like I said, we’re scratching the surface and I think we’ll get there but it may take a little bit of time.

JL: Alright. And just one more question, we’re moving along nicely. What variables do you think influence why you approach communication with your employees the way you do?

Interviewee: You mean like what variables lead me to make one decision instead of another in terms of how I communicate?

JL: Yes, exactly.

Interviewee: I think it’s location and geography. That’s a big one. Time zones, that kind of goes along with the geography. Um, and those are really the main items. I mean if I have someone sitting down the hall I’m not going to e-mail them and I’m not going to call them. I’m going to go down to their office and talk to them. But I think that really…or, here’s another item. Or if I needed something to be documented, like if it was something for human resources reasons or legal reasons and I needed something in writing and what I’m conveying to a certain employee or outside organization, I may choose to send an e-mail versus calling them.
JL: Alright, well that’s the end of the questions so we’re now finished. Thank you so much.

**Interview 4 of 5 (Manager of Information and Technology)**

**JL:** Okay so basically how this works is I’m going to give you a few different scenarios that you would experience day-to-day in the workplace and I want to find out how you would communicate in those situations – what channels – with those employees that you manage.

**Interviewee:** Okay

**JL:** So the first situation, for the task of if you were to communicate to ask a question about a routine assignment that you’d already assigned to one of your employees how would you approach that communication?

**Interviewee:** It all depends on whether or not the employee was local, because I have a couple of folks who are in my same building, and usually I’ll just walk over and ask them “hey, how’s it going?” But typically if there’s some suspense or deadline, my expectation is that I don’t have to ask. They know to communicate proactively, which my team generally does. And if they’re remote and it deals with a specific individual and I have some questions or concerns, I’ll pick up the phone and call them. I do…and also depends on if it’s a project I assign and I specifically want to know what it is, that’s what I’ll do: call them. If it is something that just happens to come up I have a conversation with somebody else and if it’s a question I want to know, I’ll IM them or send them a text message if they’re out on the road and have their phone. Usually just not e-mail, I don’t know why. I usually only communicate with e-mail if I want some data or some facts that I want to have. I supervise 10 people.

**JL:** Okay thank you. How would you approach communication if you were to plan and strategize for a new, large project with your team?
Interviewee: I usually start out by putting together a straw man of my thoughts and ideas and depending on the scope of it, we usually get together at some kind of an off site [meeting]. The reason I do that is because you can have richer communication and more interaction and I also get to read the body language better.

JL: How would you communicate to provide constructive criticism and/or offer feedback on an employee project?

Interviewee: Usually start out by, typically when we start a project there is some point of agreement – I always make sure we agree on what’s expected. So I always refer back to the agreement that we had on expectations, what we said, talk about the things that are going well, identify the things that aren’t going well, and let the employee digest that and tell me what their plan is to get back on track.

JL: And what tools would you use to share or exchange those messages?

Interviewee: Depending on the scope or level of severity, they’re done in person, if possible. Over the phone if not. Typically I would use e-mail in a situation like that as a follow up, again to make sure we’re aligned on what the course corrections would be.

JL: What tools would you use to communicate if you needed to gauge availability of one of your employees or initiate contact? Like if you wanted to know if they were at their desk or needed to talk to them for a minute.

Interviewee: I usually check IM because at a glance it will tell me a.) if they’re at their computer and b.) it checks against their calendar, gives me red yellow green whether or not they’re available, and I can literally just move my mouse over the little icon and it tells me whether or not they’re available, and when their next free slot is. So I can at a glance figure out if they’re available, if they’re online, and typically that usually works so if it’s something urgent I
can just send an IM. If it’s something complex and extremely urgent I will interrupt them. And if they’re not on IM, I’ll go to cell phone.

**JL:** Next task. Okay how would you communicate with your employees (which tools, etc.) to share exciting team news?

**Interviewee:** Exciting team news…those I like to get everyone on a conference bridge or a virtual meeting.

**JL:** Can you explain a little more why?

**Interviewee:** It’s good stuff. Fun, exciting. Generally things like that show that our plans and activities are having success, bearing fruit, and even if it’s just somebody getting a promotion or getting a new assignment, generally good news is a good way to reinforce culture. And if I can’t get everybody on the call I’ll send out e-mails.

**JL:** Alright, next one. To follow up on the status of a daily task.

**Interviewee:** I don’t do that. I tell my folks, I could care less how and when you get it done, just get it done.

**JL:** When you typically assign something, how do you do that?

**Interviewee:** I generally let them call me if they have anything they want to know. I set up a pacing of communications with my team. So every Monday we have a team call for an hour, I let them know what transpired in my week and they share with me what transpired in their week and any issues that have come up. Once a month we have a two hour call and we give updates on significant projects. Every other Friday I have a one-on-one meeting with each person on my team and it alternates. In that one week we talk about performance and development and the alternating other week we talk about work related stuff. So that’s their time to update me on any status on their projects, if they have any issues they might need my help with. And then once
a quarter we get together somewhere to spend a day on project status. And we spend a half a day goofing off. So we’re going out to Arizona in two weeks…to fly an unmanned aircraft and play golf.

**JL:** How fun. Okay so next one: how would you approach communication to discuss a personal employee performance issue.

**Interviewee:** Usually at the one on ones, and if it’s something that needs immediate attention obviously we have a quick call.

**JL:** Can you give me a little bit more about why you choose those methods?

**Interviewee:** Once a month I have a conversation with my employees about performance and development. So typically if things aren’t urgent, I’ll keep it to that. I just had one where we undertook a task for the legal community and this individual overstated his ability to do something. Didn’t get a good contract around expectations with the customer, and therefore can never be successful with the customer. The customer escalated it in e-mail which wasn’t appropriate, so I had to have a conversation with the employee. Said “hey in the future whether it’s right, wrong or indifferent, that you agree on what you expect me to do and here’s when you expect me to have it done. And if you can share with them your path to getting there, that informs the customer more, but that way you leave with an agreement on what you gotta do, when you gotta do it.” And then I got both of them on a call and kind of worked through it. Because at the end of the day, we might have disagreements but we still have to work together.

**JL:** Okay. How would you alert your team that you’re in overload mode or that you might not get to something they need you for?

**Interviewee:** When I get in overload mode, the only thing – the closest I come to that is when my calendar fills up and they have something they want to discuss. They’ll look at my
calendar and see that I have no time coming up. I usually allow them to…so we have every other
Friday off here, so I’ll allow them to schedule meetings on my day off. I make my time
available to them. So I expand my schedule to accommodate them.

**JL:** So then the tool that you use…

**Interviewee:** The calendar. The online Outlook calendar. That just happened, somebody
said “oh we have to talk about this but his calendar is full and we don’t have time, is it okay if I
have the meeting at 5:30?” And if it’s really important, they know that they can interrupt me in
whatever meeting I’m in. They know what’s important and what’s not.

**JL:** Okay now another scenario. To answer a question to clarify an assignment or project
if someone tells you they’re not sure what’s going on or they have a question about it. How
would you approach that communication?

**Interviewee:** Well it depends on how they ask the question. I usually respond in kind. If
we’re talking, I’ll do it verbally. If they shoot me an e-mail, I will respond in an e-mail unless the
e-mail or the text I get says that they really missed the point. So I have a three strike rule. If I get
more than three e-mails or more than three IMs about something, I usually take it to the phone
because I don’t have all day to sit here and go back and forth on stuff. It’s like okay, something’s
missing, we gotta have a higher level – higher fidelity conversation. Typically we have, we use
ATT Web Connect for anytime anyone wants to share documents. So just about every meeting I
set up, with few exceptions, has a web component to it.

**JL:** So it’s kind of using two forms of communication at once?

**Interviewee:** Yes. Actually it winds up being many. Because the tool we have you can
use, depending on your level of sophistication, you can use just your computer and put
headphones in and you can speak and have a voice conference and watch presentations. And if
you’re on the road, you can even take your iPhone or Blackberry and watch the presentation. We’re trying to figure out how to get more video.

JL: Okay so that’s all for the scenarios, so I just have a few other question about workplace communication.

Interviewee: Am I giving you enough?

JL: Yes absolutely. Okay so next question is how would you describe your personal outlook on workplace communication and its significance, specifically in relationship to the employees you manage?

Interviewee: Funny you say that. Communication, especially in my function is critical because a lot of what we drive is change to users. Change associated with technology or change in a process of theirs. And we’re also trying to drive changes in behavior. So communication is critical because in order for the change to stick, users have to internalize it. And the only way we can do that is through communication because we can’t just plug them in and download it. As a matter of fact I spoke with someone this morning and said, “I need a full-time communications management person and I know you’re swamped. I will higher and pay for this person as long as they’re plugged into your organization and dedicated to me because we have some pretty significant projects that we’re trying to communicate and we’ve been using the web. Made a nice little video, I’m here going around to senior leaders setting up one-on-ones in conference rooms to kind of get them jazzed about it. And we’re doing e-mails. So we’ll probably have to get some posters made up, I made up a nice little brochure so just…I’m new to the company and the culture here from a technology perspective is pretty slow to change and everyone is very resistant to change. So communication is critical. I just spoke with someone else and we’re going to set up some type of a users’ forum. Because while we think about the change we want to
implement, and we’re plan and are meticulous at it, we are in the IT community and we need to figure how we get better feedback and communication from average users on what they see. At the end of the day our day job is technology but at the end of the day their day job isn’t technology. So we need to get better communication from them on what’s working, what’s not, what we can do better. And we need to have it in a proactive way that’s not just calling a help desk, because that’s reactive.

**JL:** Alright. Next question. What do you feel your strengths are in communicating with the people you manage?

**Interviewee:** Very direct. No hidden agendas.

**JL:** And do you have anything you have anything you’d like to improve?

**Interviewee:** Yes, I know what my weakness is. We have a lot of work to get done, we have a lot of things that need to occur, and I build consensus and alignment versus agreement, and not everyone always agrees. So I need to spend more time understanding those that don’t agree and try to get them on board.

**JL:** Great thank you. Okay and I know we’ve kind of touched on this but the more detail I have, the better. Do you value face-to-face communication in today’s workplace? And why?

**Interviewee:** So I don’t…let me sort out what I am going to say. I don’t value the face-to-face communication because I think I’m a pretty effective communicator without face-to-face. But I value the face-to-face interactions.

**JL:** That makes sense. And why is that?

**Interviewee:** I enjoy talking to people. It doesn’t have to be about anything in particular. My wife is always amazed that I have random conversations with strangers.

**JL:** And how do you think that benefits your manager-employee relationships?
Interviewee: It works well because they see me as open and approachable. They know I’m not afraid to talk about anything but they know I am very direct.

JL: Okay thanks. And this next question, I know you’re the CIO but I am going to ask it anyway for uniformity: do you consider yourself adept at technology and computer-mediated forms of communication?

Interviewee: Yes I am. For me it’s second nature because people will ask me “where do you work?” And I say “wherever I can have a cell phone work and get internet access.” And that’s because I came here from another company where I managed folks all over North America. I managed a team of three hundred, which zero I could walk up to and talk to. So I became very comfortable living and working virtually. And that’s also I guess why I value the experience of people more than the communication. I know how to communicate but I like the experience of interacting with them.

JL: Alright well we’re actually already to the last question, so just this one more. Please explain to me what variables you think exist that influence why you communicate with employees the way you do. So like why you choose to use one tool over another.

Interviewee: I would say it depends on what’s going on and how busy I am. Because there are times where I literally say, “Hey I have a break. Let me call somebody.” So it depends a lot on my schedule and pace. Also things that are going on – if there’s something urgent or critical – the sensitivity of what’s at hand. And the access to technology. Obviously if my laptop is closed I’m not going to get on and IM somebody real quick.

JL: Are these all variables specific to this company?

Interviewee: No, they can be anywhere. Obviously if you don’t have the technology, then having e-mail on a cell phone gives you ability to do e-mail more continuously but I can’t
pull up – well maybe I can host conference on a phone, I’ve never tried. Maybe I’ll get an iPad for that.

**JL:** Any other thoughts?

**Interviewee:** We need more video (as a CMC tool used). To quote your phrase it’s a “richer” experience. So basically I see it as IM and texting are brief and to the point. E-mail is concise, but less concise than IM or texting. Then you have the phone which is not as concise, and finally you have videoconferencing where you can look at people and spend time conversing. There is a new technology out there called Telepresence by Cisco and it enables hi-def chats, the rich experience virtually. They say it’s the next best thing to being there.

**Interview 5 of 5 (Manager of Digital Communications)**

**JL:** So basically the first part of this, I’m going to give you a few different scenarios that you would experience in a day-to-day work environment and I’m particularly interested in the communication channels that you would use and why. And this is specifically related to you as a manager – how you would communicate with the employees who report to you. So I guess that said we can get started. The first scenario is how would you approach the communication to ask a routine question about an assignment that you had already assigned to someone?

**Interviewee:** I would say via e-mail or if I had in place, I’m just starting to put in place, routine team calls to discuss these issues. I’d just ask for a routine update on there. First choice would be getting that information on a team phone call, second would be e-mail. And third would be a direct phone call to the individual if I felt the first two were nonresponsive. It’s interesting too because a lot of what I will tell you is hypothetical in terms of where the company is going with things because right now we have not really had any digital communication yet. We’ve had three or four separate intranets that worked to varying degrees. Our intranet is pretty
bad if you take a look at it – it’s okay in terms of one-way communication but it’s very static. So basically there was a desire for the company to create a new digital communications capability consistent with its efforts to elevate the overall corporate profile from an external perspective. And then also from an internal perspective to have one intranet that had social networking tools so that we could better utilize the intellectual properties of our company. Um, and so I basically in the past, since I’ve been here five months we’ve integrated two of the intranets. We have plans to by the end of the year get the national company on a common intranet, and as a third parallel process we have plans to put the global company on the intranet. So a lot of what I tell you may be hypothetical in terms of what we should be doing or will be doing in the future, we just aren’t right now. The whole digital communications capability is a new function and I have one employee who reports to me at this juncture.

**JL:** Okay the next situation is if you were to plan or strategize for a new large project with your team, how would you approach that in terms of the channel used, and why?

**Interviewee:** I would say, especially because my one employee is in Vermont, in terms of a strategy planning session I would probably prefer to do that in person. Secondarily would be a phone call. And I should also say too over the past few months I’ve used – we have a desktop portal AT&T iConnect where we can basically show a Power Point presentation to all who call in, so that would be the secondary choice if it’s a strategy and planning session.

**JL:** And why, what’s your reasoning for that? Why do you prefer it?

**Interviewee:** I feel that when trying to strategize and when something requires brainstorming and more in-depth thought process that I believe requires more attention span, it is easier to I believe do that around a table where you can see people’s faces and know that you have their full attention span versus just a conference call. At least to set the motion. In most of
my work in government we would have on particular issues...we would do a kickoff meeting, develop a strategy, put it on paper and then it would be weekly calls. And for some of us it would almost be daily calls.

JL: Okay and what if you were to, if you needed to provide constructive criticism or offer feedback on an employee’s project, how would you do that?

Interviewee: Um I would say in person. But again in my current situation just because of the logistics I’d probably call him because he’s in Vermont. But I prefer face-to-face. If he were down the hall I’d go talk face-to-face.

JL: And can you elaborate a little bit for me on why?

Interviewee: I believe that, again, I think that the communication would have more effect and sincerity when it’s conveyed face-to-face versus over the phone.

JL: And how about if you needed to gauge availability or initiate contact with your employee? To find out if they were at their desk or that type of thing, what would you do?

Interviewee: E-mail.

JL: Okay. And why?

Interviewee: It’s quick, it’s least intrusive I guess, for something as minor as just checking on someone or initiating communication.

JL: Alright and then if you were to share exciting team news, how would you communicate that news?

Interviewee: Probably via e-mail.

JL: And the reason for that?

Interviewee: Because I believe it’s, in terms of memorializing, I believe it’s easier to memorialize those kinds of thoughts in written words versus verbal words and they also have the
effect of being permanent especially if you’re celebrating good news or praising somebody for their work, that’s something that can be kept as a record or a memento.

**JL:** Okay great. Alright how about to follow up on the status of a daily task?

**Interviewee:** E-mail. Also, our company has – I haven’t used it a lot but I am starting to use it more but we have an IM system. So I would use that secondarily. But that’s more just because I am easing my comfort in using it. I could see using it more in the future.

**JL:** And why do you think those are suitable for that task?

**Interviewee:** Again, they are quick, less intrusive ways to foster dialogue where presumable a long explanation may not be required.

**JL:** I know I keep probing you on what seems obvious but it helps to have more information for later. So thanks.

**Interviewee:** No problem.

**JL:** Okay so the next situation is kind of similar to feedback, but to discuss a personal employee performance issue?

**Interviewee:** In person. I can’t imagine any other way. If the person wasn’t available I would wait until they were available so we could schedule a face-to-face mainly just because I think it’s an important connection to establish with someone who works for you.

**JL:** Okay let’s see. And then if you were in overload mode and just couldn’t get to something, how would you alert your team about that?

**Interviewee:** Via e-mail. It is easily, I believe the easiest form of communication to reach a larger group of people, especially when time is of the essence.

**JL:** Okay, just one more scenario. If your employee had question or needed clarification on an assignment how would you answer their question?
Interviewee: If they wanted clarification I would probably pick up the phone and call them in response to a question they may have responded via e-mail. Unless it’s a simple question but I would prefer if there is any ambiguity or confusion based on guidance that I’ve given, I’d prefer to relay it verbally.

JL: Okay so that’s all for the scenarios and then I have a few different questions related to your overall outlook on communication in the workplace.

Interviewee: Sure.

JL: How would you describe your personal outlook on workplace communication and how it’s significant, particularly in regard to the employees you manage?

Interviewee: I believe it’s vitally important and, again, in my last position I directly managed 23 people, so I hearken a little more to my experience there, but even here I think it’s critically important to communicate with employees through different channels.

JL: And what would you say your strengths are in communicating with the employees you manage?

Interviewee: I try to be as clear as possible on the scope of the project and what is expected of them. I try to deliver it in a way that engenders cooperation in a way that is polite and cordial, and so they want to respond based the way I’ve given the instruction. And in a sense, some of the projects could inspire motivation behind a particular organizational objective.

JL: And do you have anything you’d like to improve?

Interviewee: I guess there are times that I have been less clear about deadlines in terms of expectations for time, especially if it’s a very tight deadline and I’m asking them to do it. Sometimes I’m probably not as direct as I should be. I guess that’s one area I’d look to improve as a manager.
JL: And are you provided with guidelines or training about managing internal communication?

Interviewee: No. We’re encouraged to participate in external management training sessions, and then there are required internal management training sessions in terms of rules and policies but not just general management characteristics.

JL: Do you value face-to-face communication in today’s workplace?

Interviewee: I do. I think it’s critically important.

JL: Would you elaborate for me?

Interviewee: I think face-to-face communication in the workplace is the most effective way to motivate employees to accomplish certain goals and objectives.

JL: Okay. And would you consider yourself adept at technology and computer-mediated forms of communication?

Interviewee: Um, I guess what is your definition of adept?

JL: Well, just let me know if you feel like you’re able to employ some of the different computer-mediated tools and do you feel comfortable with them?

Interviewee: I would say yes that I am. Especially with the growth of social media in the past couple years, there are certain aspects of social media that I don’t feel as comfortable with but in terms of common e-mail platforms and internal IM, um other technology functions that are on the desktop I would say yes, that I have a full understanding of those.

JL: And do you feel like you use them regularly?

Interviewee: Yes. And there are other things. I just had a conversation about how social media tools provide good ways for networking like you can set up your own internal network
around an issue and those are things I’m not yet familiar with but things that I think are important and hopefully at some point in time we are able to utilize.

**JL:** Okay and we are at the last question already. What variables do you think influence why you approach communication with your employees in the way you do?

**Interviewee:** I think that variables, especially here, essentially being in a state of transition should foster additional communication but it does not always work that way, but it should. And again, being in a state of transition can cause ambiguity for certain people’s roles and responsibilities and what they’re supposed to do. And that’s the other thing I guess I haven’t mentioned it but I’ve always been a firm believer in making sure people understand their roles and responsibilities. I’m currently in the process of writing roles and responsibilities for my employee so he knows what the expectations are. What else…uh…you know geography and distance obviously is a variable too. I, from a manager perspective, work with the employees from our parent company [overseas], and um it’s a challenge to communicate at times because of the geographic distance and then the time zones associated with them. And then also in my particular case, my employee is in Vermont, and it does add some challenges to communicating. Those are the ones I can think of. At a company like this we have 200 and something locations around the company and different ways of structure…so it’s definitely an organizational challenge.

**JL:** Alright.

**Interviewee:** Hopefully that was helpful.

**JL:** Very helpful. Any final thoughts?

**Interviewee:** Well I do think that there’s a lot of social media tools that we could have, like internal social networking systems where you can essentially type into a network a particular
skill if you’re looking for something, for example tech and project management, and it would come up with all the people within the company within that social network, and then you can click on their page and especially if they’re really into their job they may have written case studies about some of the things that they have done. And we’re moving in that direction but I think that it’s vitally important that you put those kinds of communication networks in place especially because as the younger generation moves into the work force, that’s really the only way many of them have known to communicate via social networks or microblogs and things like that. Even e-mail at times is almost old-fashioned. So I think that moving that direction in any organization…a lot of the very successful organizations are doing that. I think it can just be an effective tool to motivate employees to be interested in what they’re doing if they can share what they’re doing and know that it’s benefiting some other division that otherwise without that communication channel would not have existed. And I think that too the whole premise of social networks is that as human beings we’re social, and it helps further create relationships in the workplace that aren’t always easily created.

**JL:** Thanks so much, this is good information. And that’s all I have for today.