

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *The paper approaches the interaction between the digital world and the business world from the perspective of the influence exerted by the development of information and communications technology (ICT) on the process of communication in business. Starting from such examples of ICT-based services as cloud computing, voicemail and social media, the paper points out the positive and negative aspects of digital communication, emphasizing the impact of virtual space on its users.*

KEY – WORDS: *IT, ICT, virtual environment, communication infrastructure cloud computing, voicemail, social media, self-disclosure*

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1. INFORMATIN TECHNOLOGY AND ITS ROLE IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

The concept of Information Technology (IT) covers “the use of any computers, storage, networking and other physical devices, infrastructure and processes to create, process, store, secure and exchange all forms of electronic data”. (<https://searchdatacenter.techtarget.com/definition/IT>) By emphasizing the close connection between hardware, software and the communication space they underlie, this definition implicitly accounts for the rapid changes in the everyday and business interactions under the impact of technological progress.

Moreover, the connection between the digital and the communication world has reached such a deep level over the past few decades that the two are currently perceived as synonyms. This phenomenon is basically sustained by the following global realities:

- the ever-increasing need for rapid acquisition, processing, organization and transmission of information on various levels of human activity;

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- the expansion of the virtual environment during the past two years, when the pandemic context has brought about a massive paradigm shift on every level of human interaction, from education and workplace relations to shopping, entertainment and socialization.

In this context, the concept of **ICT** (Information and Communications Technology) emerges at the intersection between the area of data processing infrastructure and the area of communication needs they support.

1. ICT - BASED SERVICES

The main services covered by the concept of ICT, developed in recent years as a result of the dynamics of the business communication environment are the following:

1.2.1. Cloud computing, which is a service that enables the private and public users to store large amounts of data on remote servers and to access them at any moment, from anywhere in the world, and from any electronic device, via the Internet. Apart from avoiding the overload of personal and company computers, storage in the virtual space also relieves the user, whether private or public, from great psychological pressure related with misplacing files, losing information as a result of hardware failure/software corruption, or the possibility of late retrieval. For the individual user, personal work space expands to the point where it merges into the cyberspace, taking advantage of all its storage and networking resources. For companies, cloud computing is part of the natural process of adjustment to the demands of the global business environment, taking into account the dramatic impact it has on the speed, efficiency and security of communication both within a company and among different companies, regardless of their location on the map. (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/cloud-computing.asp#what-is-cloud-computing>).

Types of Cloud Computing

The cloud computing system consists of three main categories of services, with varying degrees of complexity and different levels of control on the part of the user, namely:

- **Software-as-a-service (SaaS)**, which allows users to access such cloud-based applications as email, calendaring, and various office tools. It is common practice for companies to purchase such applications to be easily accessed by the employees over the Internet. Alongside with data accessibility, a major advantage of this service is that the provider manages all the underlying infrastructure (hardware and software) applications data being hosted by a data center on the remote at minimal cost and in conditions of maximum safety. This type of service grants the user the lowest level of control, by providing them with tools to handle well defined applications in an already structured environment (<https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/overview/what-is-saas>);
- **Infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS)**, a type of cloud computing service that provides companies with storage and networking resources, managing the entire underlying infrastructure on a pay-as-you-go basis. This remote data

and infrastructure management leads to a dramatic reduction of costs in terms of maintenance, as well as to a more efficient time management. On the other hand, by enabling the company to purchase and manage only the necessary applications and software and pay for them only as long as they are needed, the service supports an increasingly flexible and dynamic on-site infrastructure with major impact on efficiency and security. This type of service highest level of control, allowing them to manage their own virtual servers, which involves assuming responsibility for the application runtime environment and the operating system (<https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/overview/what-is-iaas/#overview>) ;

- **Platform-as-a-service (PaaS)** allows businesses to use and manage custom cloud applications, the building and maintaining of servers and infrastructure being covered by the provider. In addition to monitoring and maintaining servers, providers ensure constant updating of software and cover security issues pertaining to data handling. Thus, companies are able to update their applications by using the provided integration, monitoring and management tools, as well as to access and use their data without having to set up and maintain their own databases (<https://www.salesforce.com/paas/overview>) .

As it follows from the above, the main **advantages of cloud computing services** are the following:

- Facilitate the access to files and settings on multiple devices, which dramatically enhances mobility, flexibility and efficiency of communication;
- Offer the users the ability to access their email on any computer and to store files by Dropbox and Google Drive;
- Enable the users to back up files of any type, which ensures availability of data in the event of a system crash;
- Save companies the financial and human resources efforts related with purchasing and maintaining information management technology and infrastructure by replacing the on-site servers and work with faster and more efficient online activities and communication;
- Allow users to save storage space on individual devices;
- Ensure faster upgrading of software, as new versions of programs or products can be downloaded on the web, either for free, or on a subscription basis.

However, as with any process developing in the volatile environment of the cyberspace, there are also a number of disadvantages pertaining to the use of cloud computing, namely:

- Security issues, which arise in case the data encryption key is lost, in spite of the security and compliance measures;
- Vulnerability of cloud servers to natural disasters, internal failure, or power breakdowns;
- The vast geographical coverage of these services can easily turn into a disadvantage, with proportional impact of server crash on remote areas;
- Susceptibility to be affected by human errors, inevitable when a large number of users' access and handle information through a specific portal.

1.2.2. Voicemail, a service which enables its users to transmit audio-video messages via office phones, cell phones, or by using more sophisticated applications such as *AudioMemo* or *Notes*. Business communication experts have determined that voicemail is used in companies to manage both internal relations and external relations. Internal relations involve conveying information between management and employees, or among coworkers, whereas external relations refer to the communication with customers or clients for marketing purposes, with job applicants during recruitment, and with business partners at every stage of the collaboration process. (Robinson 2014, p.43)

Thus, given the variety of communication contexts, composing a voice message requires on the part of the sender such oral communication abilities as the capacity to adapt the discourse to the audiences involved, and to keep the content as concise, clear and meaningful as possible in order to elicit a positive response from the receiver. In this context, specialists in the field of business communication are of the opinion that voicemail should be viewed as a speech act, whose main objective is “to create shared meaning between the sender and the receiver” (Robinson 2014, p. 45). In order to fulfil this purpose, the voicemail message composer has to consider two categories of variables, namely:

- **Variables that voicemail shares with email**, on grounds of the simultaneous consideration of the message content, the receiver and the communication channel. This category includes message structure and the correct use of language (adequate vocabulary, and compliance with morphology and syntax rules);
- **Variables specific to the oral context (verbal and non-verbal cues)**, which include the special attention paid to the amount of transmitted information and the clarity of its purpose. To be more specific, in order to elicit the desired response (a return call), the voicemail message should be concise and present relevant information meant to persuade the receiver that the message is worth considering.

As with any other act of persuasion, the success of a voicemail message depends not only on verbal cues (structure and content), but also on non-verbal cues pertaining to delivery. These cues are of major importance, since they largely determine the way in which the speaker is perceived by the recipient and, implicitly, the expected feedback. In this sense, business communication experts have determined the following non-verbal cues that have a dramatic impact on accomplishing the desired goal of the voicemail message:

- Background noise and technical difficulties due to poor reception or faulty equipment;
- Timing (leaving a message during the weekend or after hours);
- Speech volume and pitch (loudness of speech and variations in intonation);
- Speech rate, articulation, enunciation (speed of speech, correctness of pronunciation, clarity of subject statement). (Robinson 2014, pp.48-49)

1.2.3. Social media is “a computer-mediated form of communication that allows a sender to interact with multiple potential recipients of a message via a website” (Robinson 2014, p.65), such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or Google+. These media of communication have surged in the past two decades due to people’s growing need for rapid and easy social and professional connection.

Social media expanded and developed in response to the changing needs of an ever more complex and competitive business environment, evolving from an exclusively interpersonal channel of communication to a valuable organizational tool supporting the interaction between companies and their customers or clients, in terms of product or service promotion and marketing. On the other hand, the use of social media as a recruitment tool has led to the emergence of specialized sites that host professional communities. A relevant example in this sense is LinkedIn, a professional networking site that provides its users with virtual space dedicated to the exchange of information between job seekers and HR recruiters. Thus, by displaying such relevant information as studies, work experience and professional skills, the site operates as an interface between employers and potential employees and relieves both sides from the painstaking effort of matching supply and demand on the labor market.

The dimensions and openness of the virtual space in the case of social media generates a much more complex communication process. In comparison with email and voicemail, where the sender has fully controls the amount and nature of the information sent, as well as the list of intended recipients, with social media the users are more exposed, since personal information is shared with all the members of the virtual community, in which everyone is able to search and follow everyone else on grounds of membership. In this context, the sender’s control shifts from the recipients of the message to the message itself because, if we cannot decide *who* sees our profile, we can certainly decide *what* it contains. Consequently, the users of social media interactions must be discerning and cautious regarding the personal information they provide, in order not to create distorted expectations and, implicitly, to elicit positive response from the receivers.

To be able to develop efficient interactions on social media, users must consider two types of variables:

- **Variables shared with email and voicemail** (appropriate and correct language, as well as adequate structure, content and delivery);
- **Specific variables**, of which the most relevant are **self-disclosure** and, closely related to it, the so-called **online disinhibition effect**.

The concept of **self-disclosure** is not new, being present in literature long before the surge of virtual communication. As early as the seventies of the twentieth century, neuropsychologist G. J. Chelune noted in the book *Self-Disclosure: Origins, Patterns and Implications of Openness in Interpersonal Relationships* that “people cannot enter social transactions with others without revealing something of themselves or being affected by what the other reveals to them”. (Chelune 1979, p. 243) In the following decades, the dynamics of computer-mediated communication was accompanied by the expansion of research dedicated to the process of communication in the virtual space and the impact it has on the interlocutors in comparison with face-

to-face communication. Thus, communication experts have pointed out three characteristics of online interactions that influence disclosure, namely:

1. **Anonymity** - the users are able to select the information they share and even to decide the name under which they construct their identity;

2. **The lack of visual cues**, which means that the physical aspect of the interlocutors does no influence the interaction between individuals as it does in real life encounters;

3. **Asynchronicity** - since interaction does not take place in real time, interlocutors are relieved from the pressure of spontaneity and exert more control on the dynamics of conversation by taking time to formulate what they intend to say and deciding on the moments when they join or leave the exchange. (McKenna & Bargh 2000, pp. 60-62)

There are two important aspects that follow from the research summarized above, namely

- computer-based communication is a form of virtual negotiation of identities;
- this type of negotiation differs from real life communication in the sense that the virtual space offers the users a specific sense of comfort and safety generated by the enhanced control they have over the interaction.

This sense of comfort has been identified by computer-based communication expert J. Suler as the **online disinhibition effect (ODE)**. In an article of 2001, which was to become part of his notorious 2004 book *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, Suler notices: "It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly".

(<https://truecenterpublishing.com/psyber/disinhibit.html>).

At the same time, he establishes a close connection between disinhibition and self-disclosure, by defining the phenomenon as a 'two-edged sword', with a *benign* side, in which, the disclosure of personal information and intimate emotions have a positive outcome, under the form of generosity, support and empathy from the others, and a *toxic* side, by virtue of which people, under the protection of anonymity, use the Internet as a space where they manifest the darkest sides of their personality (inclinations towards violence or pornography), which they would never expose in the real world.

On the other hand, he refines the findings of previous research by introducing new variables that determine human behavior in the virtual space. Therefore, apart from anonymity, invisibility and asynchronicity, Suler introduces three other variables of virtual communication that stimulate the users' disinhibited behavior in the cyberspace.

The first is **solipsistic introjection**, a psychological phenomenon based on the absence of non-verbal cues. In the absence of physical perception, the verbal message is appropriated by the recipient through a subtle identification with the sender: "When reading another's message, it's also possible that you "hear" that person's words using your own voice" (<https://truecenterpublishing.com/psyber/disinhibit.html>).

Moreover, since the image of our interlocutor rises at the intersection of what they choose to share about themselves and the projection of our own previous

experiences, wishes and fantasies, the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred alongside with the limitations of real social interaction and the inhibition pertaining to it.

The second variable is **dissociative imagination**, through which the interlocutors become imaginary characters in one another's virtual reality, sometimes completely separate from real life. In its turn, this dissociation between fact and fiction generates a state of disinhibition in relation with others.

The third variable is **minimalization of status and authority**, which means that power relations in real life are entirely reconsidered, even if there are some cues about them. This happens due to the distancing effect of the virtual space, since "the net itself is engineered with no centralized control. As it grows, with a seemingly endless potential for creating new environments, many people see themselves as independent-minded explorers. This atmosphere and philosophy contribute to the minimizing of authority" (<https://truecenterpublishing.com/psyber/disinhibit.html>).

3. CONCLUSIONS. THE IMPACT OF ICT ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

As it follows from the above, contemporary business communication, as well as any other human interaction for that matter, is inconceivable in the absence of information and communication technology, whose evolution has had a dramatic economic, social and professional impact on the society at large. By redefining traditional concepts as time, space and interpersonal relations, the evolution of ICT was able to reach as deep as the psychological mechanisms of human behavior, where it produced irreversible changes.

The economic impact. Over the past two decades, the development of ICT has gradually redefined such concepts as workplace, meeting room or teamwork, by providing the infrastructure able to support real time communication from virtually anywhere in the world. At the same time, by rendering the concept of distance irrelevant through more efficient internal and external means of communication, the digital age has brought about numerous advantages for business, such as better management and customer service, more efficient marketing activities, and the reduction of HR costs.

The social and professional impact. Living and working in a digital world involves a continuous process of adjustment to its development by improving both the ability to use the ever more complex communication infrastructure, and the "ability to select communication behaviors and strategies best suited for a specific communication act". (Spitzberg & Cupach 1984, p. 71). The latter ability is known as 'communication competency', which is nothing but the capacity to build verbal and non-verbal cues into a discourse capable of eliciting a positive response. In contemporary business, therefore, this seems to be an indispensable professional asset.

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