



A LITTLE LESS CONVERSATION

An excess of office communication is more than just annoying – it can seriously affect your performance at work

In some workplaces everybody is so busy talking about the work that needs to be done that nobody has time to do it. While communication is vital in any workplace – whether it's between colleagues, between employer and employees or between a company and its clients – once it's reached a certain point it is no longer constructive. It literally becomes a case of all talk and no action, impacting negatively on productivity and causing unnecessary stress.

'Overcommunicating is a self-perpetuating cycle,' says career coach Cath Duncan, a member of Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (Comensa) and the driving force behind innovative coaching blog Agile Living. (Visit www.mineyourresources.com.) 'The more you overcommunicate, the

more everyone is drawn into the cycle because of the need to respond.'

OVER THE TOP

'I overexplain myself if I copy somebody new into an e-mail, which confuses matters,' says Kristal Bischoff, 24, an office manager responsible for client liaison at a digital-design company in Jo'burg. The impact of this is that everyone receiving the mail has to spend longer reading it, and those who don't really need to be involved could waste their time getting up to speed.

The time it takes to attend unnecessary meetings or to respond to an endless flood of messages into your inbox is only part of the problem. Interruptions, however brief, can distract you, resulting in a negative impact on productivity.

Too much communication also causes a lack of clarity, says Duncan. 'Nobody

really knows where their responsibilities begin and end, or where current projects are standing. This leads to stress, which reduces creativity and the quality of our thinking, and all of this naturally leads to poor performance.'

Tania Adams, a Comensa-registered professional coach with Abundance Life and Executive Coaching in Johannesburg, agrees, adding that overcommunication often ends up with no-one taking the communication seriously, and everyone thinking somebody else is accountable. 'People also become resentful and often resort to "auto-binning" e-mails from certain people – even their bosses.'

INFORMATION AGE

We live in a highly connected, information-driven world, in which it is not at all unusual to communicate through a variety of different channels

at once – from e-mail to SMS, Skype to Twitter. It can easily become a habit to convey every detail to as many people as possible.

But we can't blame technology completely – it merely enables our bad habits by providing the tools. The real reason behind our tendency to overcommunicate is that we're too quick to engage in dialogue before we're clear in our own minds on our reasons for communicating.

'There is a tendency to spam in order to avoid having to think clearly about purposeful communication, or proactively strategising outcomes for meetings,' says Adams.

Duncan likens the habit of overcommunicating to firing a 'splatter gun', and points out that it has similarly damaging consequences. 'If you're not really clear on your target – who you want to communicate with and why – then you're going to shoot in all directions, hoping to hit something. People often think it's safer just to copy everyone in on everything, but that's not the case at all. You need to be clear on your target, like a sniper.' That way, you reach only the people whose input you need, and don't waste anybody else's time or resources.

Another reason women in particular tend to overcommunicate is that we're often worried about what other people think or who we might offend. Consequently we fall into the habit of overexplaining ourselves and including too many people in the

decision-making process, which just slows things down.

NO EXCUSES

Before you send a message, consider that although you may think your blanket e-mail will cover all your bases and keep everyone in the loop, it probably isn't the most efficient way of communicating – or even necessary.

Ask yourself how many of the people on your mailing list actually need the information in your message, and how many need to be involved in a decision. Is it really necessary to set aside an hour to discuss the matter, or are you just trying to cover yourself should there be any negative fallout?

Maybe you're worried that your colleagues will think that you are placing yourself in an unjustified leadership position if you don't appear to consult all of them. 'Sometimes we go the collaborative "get-input-from-everyone" route because we're too afraid to make the decision on our own,' says Duncan.

It could also be an insidious form of procrastination – we may collect far more information and opinions than necessary in order to delay decision-making, or difficult or time-consuming action.

If you're unsure of why you feel a need to include various people in the company, rather hold off a while longer until you're clearer on your motivation for communicating, then revise your current plans.

FROM THE TOP

So how do you decide how far you need to go? The best method, according to Adams, is to ask yourself the following two questions: 'What outcome do I want to achieve by sending this e-mail or calling this meeting?' and 'Who do I need to include in order to achieve this outcome?'

If you're in a management position, your challenge is to lead by example when it comes to reducing excess communication. Often, however, this can interfere with your team's perception of you as a leader. For example, anyone not included may interpret this as a message that you don't believe they are an important part of the team.

If an employee does feel she or he was left out of the loop unfairly, Duncan advises you let them know ▶

MAIL IT

Overcommunicating isn't just about the number of people you send an e-mail to – it's also about being unnecessarily wordy. **Here's how to do it properly:**

■ Before you begin an e-mail, decide exactly why you're communicating. Is it to ask for advice or to relay specific information? 'Decide on the outcome you hope to achieve, then tailor your communication to fulfil it,' says career coach Cath Duncan of Agile Living. (Visit www.mineyourresources.com.)

■ Immediately set a clear context for the recipient. 'Begin with "I am e-mailing to follow up on..." or "Your input at this meeting is needed in order for us to achieve..."', suggests Tania Adams, a professional coach with Abundance Life and Executive Coaching in Johannesburg.

■ Stick to your purpose, resist the urge to waffle, and get your message across as succinctly as possible. 'Sometimes I use point form in my e-mails to make things absolutely clear for the person on the other end,' says Kristal Bischoff, 24, an office manager responsible for client liaison at a digital-design company in Johannesburg.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Overcommunication isn't restricted to work-related matters – you need to show restraint when it comes to sharing personal information too. Nobody wants to be an ice queen but it's equally bad to be the girl whose personal life is public. Strike a balance with these tips:

- Keep personal sharing limited to those colleagues you have a genuine personal relationship with. (That's probably no more than two or three.)
- Refrain from regaling everyone with tales of Friday night's multiple Jägerbombs, ill-advised karaoke or overnight bed guests.
- Don't 'friend' your boss on Facebook. Even if you have an easy-going relationship at work, you never know what pictures will surface or what's being written on your wall.
- No matter how cute you think your puppy or four-year-old offspring is, resist the urge to send 'Aww' pictures to everyone in the office.

