SOFT SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

8

Objectives

After completing this Chapter, the student will be able to:

- *identify various soft skills,*
- *understand the structure and processes of effective communication,*
- *relate soft skills with effective communication,*
- *write clearly and concisely,*
- *communicate effectively, build rapport and relate well with all kinds of people,*
- *facilitate and support the professional growth of others,*
- *focus efforts energetically on meeting a goal, mission or objective,*
- *utilise logical, systematic and orderly procedures to meet objectives,*
- *work effectively and productively with others and*
- *prepare an action plan to improve effectiveness of his/her communication.*

> *"Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people."*
>
> *William Butler Yeats*
>
> *Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1923 and founder of the Irish National Theatre Company at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.*

Introduction

Having knowledge, i.e itself is not enough, we need to communicate it to others effectively. In fact effective communication is one of the keys to success. By successfully getting our message across, we convey our thoughts and ideas effectively. The message is the information that we want to communicate. It is essential to be technically sound, but we should also have the ability to express and communicate our ideas clearly and effectively to others in the simplest possible manner. Effective communication and soft skills not only improve our relationships with others, but they also improve our efficiency.

We have learnt in earlier chapters what communication is and how messages can be communicated through various technical skills (also called hard skills), like electronic word processing/presentation, the Internet, etc., and a few more will be discussed in the next unit on Web Publishing Technologies. In this chapter we discuss what soft skills are and how these could

be used for effective communication in the context of computer/IT mediated communication.

8.1 WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

Soft or social skills (also called non-technical skills) are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to work well with others in a project team. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner with one's colleagues. These skills include effective communication, leadership, and teamwork skills; demonstrating problem solving abilities, initiative, and motivation skills; displaying honesty and strong work ethics.

Soft skills play a vital role for academic and professional success; they help us excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in the emerging information or knowledge society. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner with one's colleagues.

8.1.1 TYPES OF SOFT SKILLS

There are various components that comprise soft skills. Some are inborn such as confidence, friendliness and whether or not someone has a sociable nature, while others are skills that can be taught or improved upon, such as developing effective communication, organisation, and social graces.

A large number of soft skills are known today. However, a different set of soft skills is required for a specific type/nature of work. For our purpose these may include the following:

- communication skills
- listening skills
- presentation skills
- interpersonal skills
- team skills
- leadership skills
- etiquette
- cross-cultural skills
- language skills, etc.

Some of these are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

Communication Skills

The ability to communicate ideas to others effectively is an absolute essential requirement for our career building. Speaking clearly and coherently will allow effective verbal communication with others. How we speak is more influential to the person who we are communicating with than what we actually say, so we should be careful about our

body language and tone of our voice when we are talking. Communication is a two–way process. Listening is therefore an essential skill too. Listening is more than just hearing what is being said. Effective listening encourages others to listen to us and respond to what we say. If communication skills are an area that we feel we could improve on, we should set about identifying ways in which we could develop them. Communication subsumes delegation, listening and presentation.

The ability to present comprehensive written ideas will enable us to put forward professional documentation of our thoughts and is a highly regarded skill. If we write so that misinterpretation is minimised we will find that people are far more receptive to our suggestions.

Effective communication skills are something every one needs to possess. Verbal communication skill includes a one-to-one interaction, presentation/public speaking ability, and good telephonic skills. Written communication would include program writing, report writing, letter writing and e-mail etiquette, etc.

8.1.2 How to Develop Soft Skills?

Developing soft skills needs practice. These are acquired and experienced on the spot. Soft skills cannot be acquired by merely reading textbooks. The soft skills we gain equip us to excel in our academic/professional life and in our personal life. It is a continuous learning process.

Development of soft skills has two parts. One part involves developing attitudes and attributes, and the other part involves fine-tuning communication skills to express attitudes, ideas, and thoughts. Perfect integration of ideas and attitudes with appropriate communication skills in oral, written, and non-verbal areas is necessary for successful work. Attitudes and skills are integral to soft skills. Each one influences and complements the other.

8.1.3 Hard Skills vs Soft Skills

Hard skills are technical procedures/tools related to our field. Examples include work place productivity tools (Unit II), computer protocols, etc. These skills are typically easy to observe, quantify and measure. By contrast, "soft skills" are typically hard to observe, quantify and measure. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements. Soft skills are as important, if not more important, than traditional hard skills at our work place.

8.2 COMMUNICATION

We know that communication is to get our message across to others clearly and unambiguously and it is most important for our progress. For this, we must understand what our message is, who the audience

is and how it will be perceived. We must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding our communications, such as the situational and cultural context.

Information is giving out while communication is getting through.

8.2.1 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial to the success of an academician as they help him in dealing with people at the emotional level. Effective communication and soft skills not only improve relationships, but also improve efficiency. Communicating effectively is characterised by such things as active listening, using self for messages, conflict management, positive body language, and asking the right questions.

Communicate with confidence, clarity and impact.

8.2.2 COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The process of communication involves effort from both the sender and receiver of the message. Else the process can be fraught with error, with messages often misinterpreted by the recipient. When the error is not detected, it can cause tremendous confusion, wasted effort and missed opportunity.

Problems with communication can pop-up at every stage of the process. To be an effective communicator and to get our point across without confusion, our goal should be to lessen the frequency of these problems at each stage. This can be done through clear, concise, accurate, and well-planned communications.

The communication process consists of basic components like sender, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, and feedback and the context.

Sender

As the source of the message, we need to be clear about why we are communicating, and what we want to communicate. We also need to be confident that the information we are communicating is useful and accurate.

Encoding

This is the process of transferring the information we want to communicate into a form that can be sent and correctly decoded at the other end. One must be careful about cultural issues, mistaken assumptions, missing information, etc.

Channel

Messages are conveyed through channels which may be verbal, including face-to-face meetings, telephone and videoconferencing and written, including letters, e-mails, memos and reports. Different channels have different strengths and weaknesses. For example, it is not effective to give a long list of directions verbally.

Decoding

Just as successful encoding is a skill, so is successful decoding (for example, taking the time to read a message carefully, or listen actively). Confusion can arise from errors in encoding as well as decoding. This is particularly the case if the decoder does not have enough knowledge to understand the message.

Receiver

Our message is delivered to individual members of our audience. No doubt, we need to be aware of the actions or reactions we hope our message will get from them. We need to bear in mind, though, that each of these individuals enters into the communication process with his or her own ideas and feelings that will undoubtedly influence their understanding of our message, and thereby, their response. To be a successful communicator, we should consider this before delivering our message, and act appropriately.

Feedback

Feedback is obtained by monitoring response of the receiver to the message. Our audience will provide us with the feedback, may be in the form of verbal and non–verbal reactions to our communicated message (Figure 8.1). Pay close attention to these feedbacks. These feedbacks are the only things that allow us to be confident that our audience has understood our message. If we find that there has been a misunderstanding, at least we have the opportunity to send the message a second time.
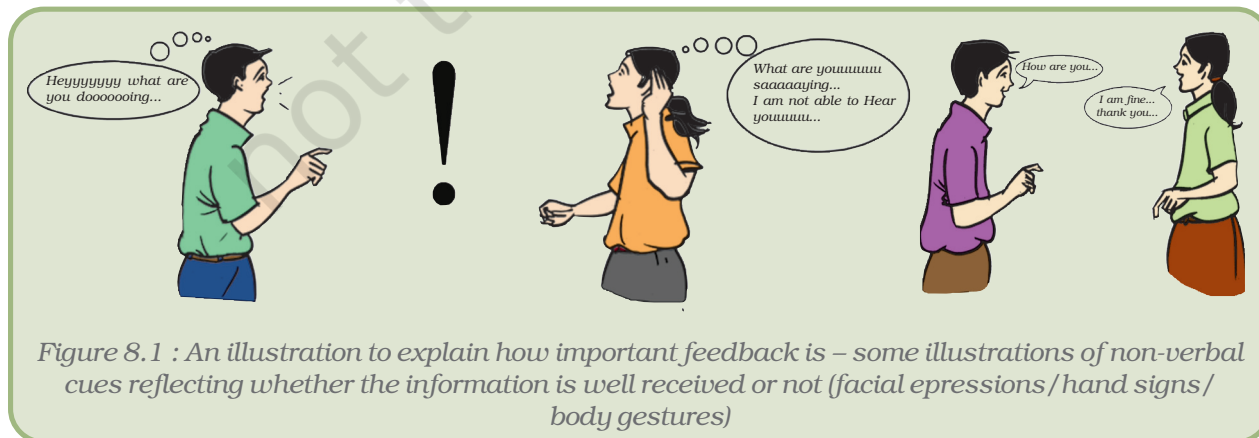

Figure 8.1 : An illustration to explain how important feedback is – some illustrations of non-verbal cues reflecting whether the information is well received or not (facial epressions/hand signs/ body gestures)

8.2.3 COMMUNICATION MODELS

Various communication models have been proposed for the communication process. The simplest of these, the sender-receiver models are discussed here.

Basic Communication Model

This model (Figure 8.2) is useful when the movement of information across space and through time is a central challenge. Since the model looks at communication from a message point-of-view, its usefulness is limited when the information exchange is so complex that it cannot be isolated into message units.
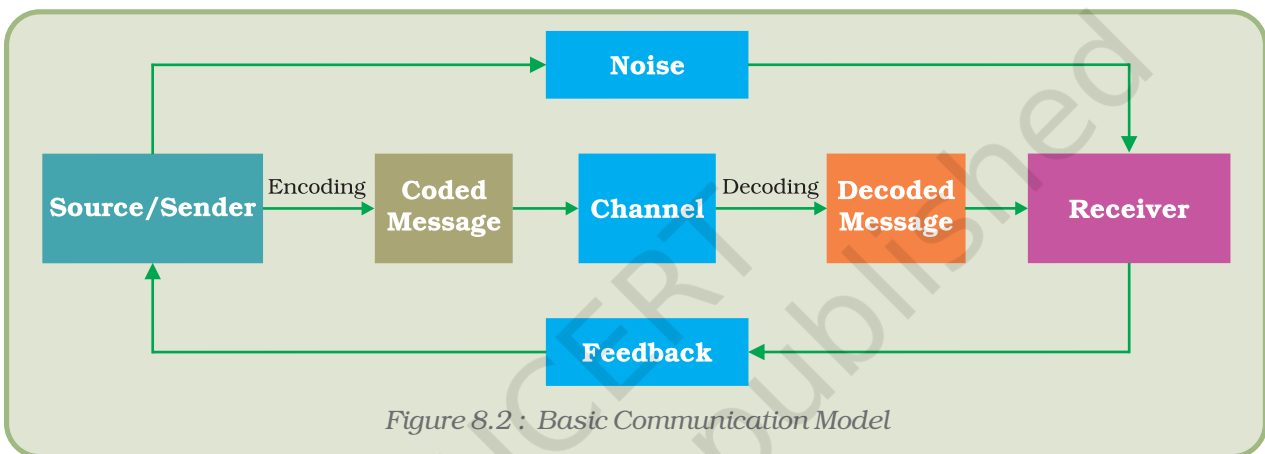

Figure 8.2 : Basic Communication Model

Interaction Communication Model

In a two-way communication/dialogue the source and receiver change positions and messages bounce back and forth (Figure 8.3).
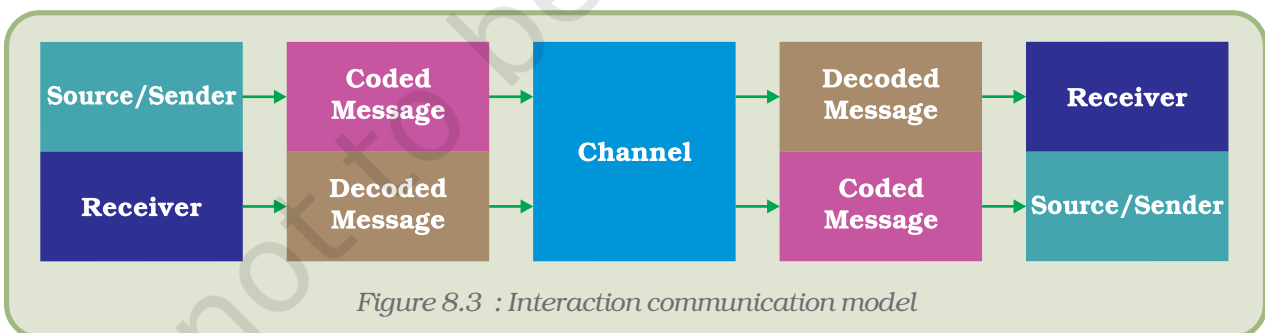

Figure 8.3 : Interaction communication model

The above model can be simplified as shown in figure 8.4.

Figure 8.4 : Interaction communication model (Simplification)

These are successful only when both the sender and receiver understand the same information.

8.2.4 CONTEXT

In a communication, there is some minimum shared context. We might be in the same physical location. Even over the phone we have, at the minimum, the commonality of time. When we generate a document paper, usually there is some context embedded in the medium: the text is in the proceedings of a conference, written on a birthday card, handed to our teacher with a batch of too westernised term papers, or something similar.

8.3 COMMUNICATION THROUGH E-MAIL

With e-mail, we cannot assume *anything* about a sender's location, time, frame of mind, profession, interests or future value to us. This means, among other things, that we have to be very, very careful about giving our receivers some context. This section will give specific strategies for doing so.

8.3.1 USEFUL SUBJECT LINES

A subject line that pertains clearly to the body of the e-mail will help people mentally shift to the proper context before they read our message. The subject line should be brief (as many mailers will truncate long subject lines), does not need to be a complete sentence, and should give a clue to the message contents. For example:

> *Subject : Need 3 Cars on Tuesday*
>
> *Ramesh – I need three cars for Thursday's demonstration in Delhi. They need to be petrol engine cars, and they need to be packed for shipping by Tuesday night.*

Here the subject line summarises effectively the most important details of the message. If the message is in response to another e-mail, our e-mail software will probably preface the subject line with Re: or RE: If our e-mail composition software does not do this, it would be proper to put in RE: by hand.

> *Subject : Re : Need 3 cars by Tuesday*
>
> *Abdul – I have got two cars already packed from last week's demo, but I do not have another functional petrol engine right now. Can you manage with two-petrol engine and one diesel engine car?*

For time-critical messages, starting with URGENT is a good idea (especially if we know the person gets a lot of e-mails):

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Subject : URGENT : Need petrol engine cars

I need to have another petrol engine car for the Mumbai demo, by tomorrow afternoon. Ramesh only has two, and I have to have three. Therefore, if anyone could help in this regard I would really appreciate it!

For requests, starting with REQ : can signal that action is needed:

Subject : REQ : Petrol cars required

Abdul's call for a petrol engine car. Please check in your garage. You have seven of them with you that you are no longer using. Please take a moment to look around your area for petrol engine cars that you are no longer using, and get them back to Ramesh.

If we are offering non-urgent information that requires no response from the other person, prefacing the subject line with FYI: (For Your Information) is not a bad idea, as in

Subject : FYI : Sweets in break room

Arti has left some sweets downstairs in the break room. First come, first served!

8.3.2 INFORMATION

We should eliminate the word "information" from the subject lines (and may be from the body of the message as well) since it may be misleading to the reader. An example to explain the point:

Subject : information

Please send me information about Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT).

This gave the reader very little clue as to what the person wanted to know: admission, application or deadlines? The number of students? The number of buildings? Was the reader supposed to send paper documents or give URLs? The only thing one could do with an e-mail like this was ask for further context. Mail like this would have been much better as:

Subject : Indian Institutes of Technology Admissions Process (IIT)

Are there any web pages about admission process to IITs?

8.3.3 QUOTING DOCUMENTS

If we are referring to previous e-mail, we should explicitly quote that document to provide context. Instead of sending e-mail that says:

Did we get all the information that we required?

Say :

> *Did we get all the information that we required?*

The greater-than sign (>) is the most conventional way to quote someone else's e-mail words, but different e-mail software may use a different convention. Even if there are a fair number of words in our response, we still might need to quote the previous message.

Key Points

We may know what we are talking about, but our readers may not. Give them the proper context by:

- Giving useful subject lines
- Avoiding pronouns in the first few lines
- Quoting the previous message or document that has been used or referred to.

    Use simple and clear words that directly indicate the purpose instead of ambiguous phrases that have the chance of being understood differently.

8.3.4 IDENTIFICATION

When one gets an e-mail from strangers, more care should be taken about what connection they have with the reader than how the reader is addressed in the mail. For instance when we send an e-mail to someone who does not know us, it would be good if we would immediately answer these questions:

- How did we learn about our correspondent?
- What do we want from our correspondent?
- Who are we?
- Why should our correspondent pay attention to us? (If we cannot answer this question, we should wonder if we should even send the e-mail).

Putting some of that information in a signature is better than nowhere at all, but putting it at the top is better for several reasons:

- Our identity is an important clue to the context of the message.
- If there is a problem with the transmission of the e-mail, the end is much more likely to get lost than the beginning.
- Many people get more than twenty messages per day, and so read them quickly. If we do not quickly establish our identity, our correspondent may delete our message before they find the underlying cause of the mail.

Good answers to the questions can take several forms:

Dear Ms Suman, I am an editor at Very Large Publishing Company, Inc. I sat next to your brother on Air India last week, and he mentioned that you are interested in publishing a book

based on your e-mail guide. I have read your guide, and would be very much interested in receiving a proposal from you.

Alternatively:

My name is Vijay and I am the legal counsel for Suraksha Security Services. We are deeply disturbed at the allegations that you cast upon us in your e-mail guide. Therefore, we order you to immediately cease and desist using any reference to Suraksha Security Services in your e-mail guide. If you do not, we will be forced to file suit against you or your descendants.

Another form of e-mail could be:

Hi - I am a novice e-mail user and just read your e-mail guide.

I don't know if you are the right person to ask or not, but do

you know what the French word for "Mister" is If you can tell

me the answer, I will send you a funny postcard.

Signatures

Many e-mail programs allow setting up a default signature to be included at the end of every message. Many people use these signatures as an easy way to give their name and alternate ways of reaching them. For example:

Hi - when do you want to go for lunch?

Suresh Gupta,

Managing Director,

Suraksha Security Services,

Wilson Street,

Delhi – 110001

Telephones: +91 11 –12346578/79

Fax: +91 11- 12345689

E-mail: suresh.g@suraksha.sec.com

Website: www.surakshasecurities.com

Such an extensive amount of signature information in contrast to such a short question looks unwanted. If they got the e-mail from you, they can reply by e-mail. So they do not need our FAX number or street address. (If they have to send a FAX or package, they can ask for address information.) They already have one e-mail address in the message we sent, and don't need our other e-mail addresses.

The name is perfectly reasonable to include, especially if

- Our e-mail messages do not include our full name in the From: line. (Send yourself an e-mail to see if our name is there or not.)
- The name in the From: line doesn't match the name we actually use
- The e-mail account is shared by multiple users (two persons having a joint e-mail account, for example).

The telephone number is also a reasonable thing to include - if we are willing to be interrupted by phone calls. Emotions are easier to convey over the phone, and some people prefer phone to e-mail for all circumstances.

If the message is business related, including the company name is a reasonable thing to do - even if the message is going to someone else in the same company.

One thing that is important from Vijay Gupta's signature above is that one would like to see is his job title. Is he the vice-president of sales or the shipping clerk? That may have more of an influence on the correspondent than anything else may. That signature is still overkill for arranging lunch, but it is not always convenient to switch between having our signature included or not.

Some people put things purely for entertainment in their signature: artwork, philosophical sayings, jokes, and/or quotations in their signature. This may be all sight, but do not overdo it.

After setting up a signature that is included automatically, it is easy to forget about it. Therefore, whenever a piece of contact information changes, make sure to revisit the signature to make sure that it is still up-to-date. In addition, if there is an entertainment piece in signature, change it occasionally. It will not be as funny the fiftieth time our coworker saw it as it will be the first time.

One final note on signatures : there is a good way to let our correspondent know that the entire message was transmitted properly. There is no body language to signal that we are "done talking" and, unfortunately, e-mail transmissions are sometimes interrupted.

Separators

Many people put pretty separators – lines, horizontal bars, and so on – around their signatures. For example:

Vijay Gupta – – – – – | Company Secretary, Suraksha Security Services.

+91 11- *12346578/79* voice | +91 11 *123465789*-fax

These are very pretty for normal (sighted) person, but imagine what it would be like for people who are visually challenged and that they have their computer read their e-mail to them: "hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen…"

That said, some e-mail programs recognise "—" as a signature separator, and so can process the signature differently. Technically, the signature is supposed to be two hyphens plus a space, but it is very common to see just two hyphens without the space.

While sending e-mails to familiar people, some people often avoid the signature mentioned above, and simply end with words like *Regards* followed by their name.

Key Points

If we are well known to our correspondent, we can probably get away without including extra identification. In other cases, we should provide our correspondent with enough clues to figure out who we are, why we are writing, and why he or she should pay attention to us. Preferably, this information will be at the top of the message.

Greetings are difficult to do well, especially if we are crossing cultures and/or languages.

8.3.5 Auto Message Responder

Many times, it is seen that there is an unprecedented delay in responding to the mail due to travelling or non-availability. It is essential to activate our auto e-mail responder option, while we are away and we cannot check our inbox. This will inform the e-mail sender about our availability status and he/she can then act accordingly, instead of impatiently waiting for a reply from our end and suffering. An example could explain it more clearly:

To:

From : Self

Subject : Away for an assignment to Manali

Dear All,

I will be away on an assignment to Manali for five days and would be unable to access my mailbox. I would respond to your mail when I get back. In case of an urgency, please get in touch with Mr. Sameer Singh at sameer.s@suraksha.sec.com

Regards

Vijay

This will help the sender in making his/her decisions accordingly.

> **Some thumb rules for writing an effective e-mail** *(net etiquette):*
>
> 1. Think before writing.
> 2. Keep the message concise.
> 3. Remember that e-mail is not necessarily confidential. Some companies retain the right to monitor employees' messages.
> 4. Do not attempt to "discipline" the reader. It is unprofessional to lose control in person – to do so in writing usually just makes the situation worse.
> 5. Do not "spam". Do not send unnecessary or frivolous messages. Soon, people will quit opening any message from you.
> 6. Do not type in all caps! It looks like we are yelling at the reader!
> 7. Do not type in all lower cases. If we violate the rules of English grammar and usage, we make it difficult for the reader to read.
> 8. Use indicative "Subject" line to get the readers' attention. e.g." Information on XYZ Project," or "Status Report Q1"
> 9. Take the time to proof read the document before sending it.

8.3.6 E-MAIL ATTACHMENT SIZE

E-mails are used for a host of purposes, for exchanging information in the form of images and other multimedia files. Due to this, many times senders attach heavy files in the form of photographs or MP3s that clog the inbox of the receiver. As an effective e-mail user, one should always see and assess the size of attachments that should be sent along with the mails. In unavoidable circumstances, it is best to confirm with the receiver before we send a heavy attachment.

8.4 TIMELINES AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

E-mails are now one of the fastest media of communication globally. In this section, we will try to understand the importance of co-existence of various cultures and time-lines within which we function. For instance, in some cultures it is appropriate to be to the point in a conversation; while in others we may be required to include the greetings and salutations and the background before we actually come to the main point of conversation.

An effective e-mail communicator always keeps in mind the comfort of the receiver of the e-mail. Keeping the timelines in mind is not necessary while writing an e-mail but one should keep timelines in mind while making a phone call. For instance, it would be inappropriate to call someone in US while it is morning in India, since it will be late night in the US.

8.5 GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS

Interestingly, even in the Indian context, we find cultural diversity. There are different ways in which people greet and acknowledge each

other. So an effective communication would include careful usage of greetings and salutations even if we are sending some documents or information from north to south or from, east to west of our own country. A careful selection of openers and closers of a document makes the whole document more interesting and effective at the same time.

Every new medium develops its own protocols or rules for opening and closing. Telephone conversations start with "Hello" and end with "Goodbye". Letters open with "Dear" and end with "Sincerely". However, even though e-mail is so often used for communication, there is no firm custom on how to open and close the same. Many people do not give either a salutation or a signature. After all, while a letter can be separated from its envelope easily, it is difficult to separate the body of an e-mail message from its addressing information. The e-mail message itself says who it is for and from whom.

In this chapter, we will learn some of the commonly practiced thoughts on openers and closers, but we need to think carefully about what we are trying to convey both explicitly and implicitly. We also need to take the culture and customs of all parties into consideration.

Salutations are tricky, especially if we are crossing cultures. Frequently, titles are different for men and women, and we may not be able to decide how to address. The family name is first in some cultures and last in others. Honorific may vary based on status or age. So do not feel bad if we have trouble figuring out which salutation to use: it is a difficult problem.

In some countries, it is a bad idea to use "Sir" or "Mr." unless we are certain that our correspondent is male. While in some others, a 'Dear Sir' is an accepted salutation. Similarly, it is probably safer to use "Ms" instead of "Miss" or "Mrs." unless we know the preference of the woman in question.

In non-formal e-mail transaction, we often use "Hi" or "Dear" to address the recipient along with their first name.

Given that e-mail is relatively informal, frequently there is no problem in dispensing with names and titles altogether, especially if we are in a position of higher status than our correspondent:

Hello - I saw your website and wanted to mention that

I invented the fountain pen on Apr 29, 1803, *not* on Apr 28, 1802.

Many people use a simple "Hi" for those they already know:

Hi - Are you going to school next week? I can bring all my project reports there...... .

"Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" do not make a lot of sense with e-mail, as the sun may have moved significantly by the time our correspondent gets around to it.

8.6 REMOVING BARRIERS AT ALL THESE STAGES

To deliver our messages effectively, we must commit to breaking down the barriers that exist in each stage of the communication process. Let us begin with the message itself. If our message is too lengthy, disorganised, or contains errors, we can expect the message to be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Barriers in context tend to stem from senders offering too much information too fast. It is best to be mindful of the demands on other people's time, especially in today's ultra-busy society. Once we understand this, we need to work to understand our audience's culture, making sure we can converse and deliver our message to people of different backgrounds and cultures within our own organisation, in our country and even abroad.

8.7 WRITING SKILLS

Many people are intimidated by writing. Even so, there are times when writing is the best way to communicate, and often the only way to get our message across. While writing, remember that once something is sent in written form, it cannot be taken back. This presents written communicators with additional challenges, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, even writing style and actual wording.

Thankfully, today's technology makes memo, letter and proposal writing much easier by providing reliable tools like word processors that check and even correct misspellt words and incorrect grammar.

8.7.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF "ETIQUETTE"

Some of the most basic tips to remember when writing include:

- Avoid slang words
- Try not to use abbreviations (unless appropriately defined or widely accepted)
- Steer away from symbols (such as ampersands [&])
- Clichés should be avoided, or at the very least, used with caution
- Brackets are used to play down words or phrases
- Dashes are generally used for emphasis
- Care should ALWAYS be taken to spell the names of people and companies correctly
- Numbers should be expressed in words when the number is less than 10 or is used to start a sentence (example : Ten years ago, my brother and I...). The number 10, or anything greater than 10, should be expressed as a figure (example : My brother has 13 matchbox cars.)

- Quotation marks should be placed around any directly quoted speech or text and around titles of publications
- Keep sentences short.

While these tips cover the most common mistakes made when writing letters, memos and reports, they in no way cover everything we need to know or ensure that our written communications are accurate and understood.

Netiquette primarily involves any communication we may send out or receive from the Net.

8.7.2 LETTER WRITING SKILLS

When writing letters, it is best to address the letter to an individual. Moreover, when beginning the letter with a personal name, be sure to end it with an appropriate closing, such as 'yours sincerely'. If we cannot obtain an individual's name, consider ending it with a more generic (less personal) closing, such as 'yours faithfully'.

Normal business letters should start with an overall summary, showing in the first paragraph why the letter is relevant to the reader. It is not a good practice to make the reader go past the first paragraph to find out why the letter was sent to them.

The body of the letter needs to explain the reason for the correspondence, including any relevant background and current information. Make sure the information flows logically, ensuring that we are making our points effectively. The closing of the letter is the final impression we leave with the reader. End with an action point, such as 'I will call later this week to discuss this further'.

8.8 THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREFUL PROOFING

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when writing a letter is to check it thoroughly after it is completed. This "unwritten" rule holds true for everything we write – memos, letters, proposals, etc.

We should use both the grammar and spell check on our computer, paying close attention to every word highlighted. We should not place total faith on our computer. Instead, we should have both a dictionary and thesaurus (printed or online) handy to double-check everything our computer's editing tools highlight, as these tools are certainly not always reliable in a given context.

Is our written communication well organised? Does each idea proceed logically to the next? Would some additional headings help? We should make sure our written communications are easy to read and contain the necessary information, using facts where needed and avoiding information that is not relevant. We should also, outline the course of action we expect, such as a return call or visit.

Finally, we should close appropriately, making sure to include our contact information. While this may seem obvious, it is sometimes overlooked and can make our written communications look amateurish. This can diminish our chances of meeting our written communication's goals.

8.9 AUDIOVISUAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Computer and Communication Technology have empowered us to digitise our audio and video inputs and communicate across long and far-reaching destinations. In most of the audio communications, many users do not keep in mind certain essential aspects of audio communication and this results in either miscommunication or no communication. Similarly, in using a tool for video communication some things should be kept in mind so that the communication is effective and there is minimal loss of information intended to be conveyed.

Audio Communication Skills

- Always have a sufficient knowledge of the issue that we are dealing with in the audio communication and the key points that we have to discuss. (always remember that the person on the other side can only hear us and respond to our details).
- Do not use very long sentences, since it is difficult to grasp if the sentences are too long.
- Always have a modulated pitch of voice, we should stress and emphasise on the words that we want to convey more strongly than the rest of our communication.
- Make use of key words and terms that are related to the issue in consideration, this will minimise the understanding time of the receiver of the information.
- Never speak in a jet speed fashion; always speak clearly voicing out each word and do not leave it for the receiver to understand it on its own.
- Always give sufficient time to <u>listen</u> to what the person on the other side is saying. Allow the other person also to speak his/her part and then respond to him/her after s/he has finished.
- Always have a note-book and pen/pencil marker to note some information given immediately by the receiver
- If we are on multi-people conference call then we should first introduce ourselves and then deliver the message.
- Use of correct salutation is also important depending upon the regional/global context of the person/s we are communicating with.
- Summarise the discussion at the end of the meeting.

Video Communication Skills

- In a video communication to one or many person(s), one should always keep in mind that audio is integrated with video. Hence most points mentioned above are relevant.
- Dressing up for the occasion is also a part of the communication, since many times video conferences are formal in nature.

- There should be enough preparation for the occasion so that while communicating, we should not be looking for any information that is sought by person(s) on the other end.
- Greeting every one and introducing our selves is essential in video communication especially when there is more than one person on board.
- Always give an opportunity to others to express themselves in the communication and allow participation of all.

8.10 ACTIVE LISTENING

Hear What People Are Really Saying

It is obvious that if we have poor interpersonal communications skills (which include active listening), our productivity will suffer. This is simply because we do not have the tools needed to influence, persuade and negotiate – all necessary for workplace success. Lines of communications must be open between people who rely on one another to get work done.

Considering this, we must be able to listen attentively if we are to perform up to expectations, avoid conflicts and misunderstandings, and to succeed. Following are a few short tips to help us enhance our communication skills and to ensure that we are an active listeners.

8.10.1 START BY UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN COMMUNICATION STYLE

Good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. Understanding our personal style of communicating will go a long way towards helping us create good and lasting impression on others. By becoming more aware of how others perceive us, we can adapt more readily to their styles of communicating. This does not mean we have to be a chameleon, changing with every personality we meet. Instead, we can make another person more comfortable with us by selecting and emphasising certain behaviours that fit within our personality and resonate with another. In doing this, we will prepare ourselves to become active listeners.

8.10.2 BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

People speak at 100 to 175 words per minute but they can listen intelligently to up to 300 words per minute. Since only a part of our mind is paying attention, it is easy to go into mind drift - thinking about other things while listening to someone. The cure for this is active listening - which involves listening with a purpose. It may be to gain information, obtain directions, understand others, solve problems, share interest, see how another person feels, show support, etc. If we are finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, we should try to repeat their words mentally as they say it - this will reinforce their message and help us control mind drift.

8.10.3 Use Nonverbal Communication

Use nonverbal behaviours to raise the channel of interpersonal communication. Nonverbal communication is facial expressions like smiles, gestures, eye contact, and even our posture. This shows our interest to the person we are communicating with. This will prompt further communication while keeping costly, time-consuming misunderstandings at a minimum.

8.10.4 Give Feedback

Remember that what someone says and what we hear can be amazingly different! Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. Repeat or summarise to ensure that we understand. Restate what we think we heard and ask, "Have I understood you correctly?" If we find ourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so, and ask for more information: "I may not understand you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally".

8.11 CHUNKING

Grouping information so it is more easily understood

Effective communication is possible when the sender and receiver are able to exchange desirable information with each other at a timely rate. Therefore, where the relevant information is and how is it stored forms a significant component of effective soft-skills in communication. Think about the amount of information we have to process each day. We read reports and meeting notes, we discuss problems, we hold team briefings, and we chat by the water cooler. Some of the information we receive is easy to understand and retain; some of it is not. The difference is often in how the information is presented.

Imagine we are playing the memory game "what's missing!" In this game, we simply have to memorise all items that are presented to us on a tray – then work out which one has been removed. If the items on the tray are presented in a jumble, will we be able to figure out what is missing? Instead, if the items are organised according to size, colour or shape, it will be so much easier to spot what is missing this time!

When the items are categorised, the "information" on the tray is much easier to make sense of and retain the same. We can skim the tray and grasp exactly what is being presented. This process of grouping information so that the intended audience easily understands it is known as "chunking".

Evidence that chunking works is all around us:

• Phone numbers and credit card numbers are typically chunked. Both types of numbers are usually chunked in groups of three or four numbers.

- When we encounter a phone number that is chunked differently than the way we are used to, it can be much harder to remember it.
- Rather than memorising the letters O – T – M – E – E – R, clubbing them to the word "REMOTE" makes the task much easier.

When written or verbal information is chunked effectively, it is logical, organised, and consistent. This enhances the audience's ability to understand what is going on. A written format that is chunked gives readers quick access to the big picture. From there they can get into the details as needed. And a verbal format that is well structured and logically chunked helps listener follow and remember key ideas or details as necessary.

An example of how the mind processing happens:

fi yuo can raed tihs, yuo hvae a sgtrane mnid too Cna yuo raed tihs? Olny 55 plepoe out of 100 can. i cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg. The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid, aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it dseno't mtaetr in waht oerdr the ltteres in a wrod are, the olny iproamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and wecan sitll raed it whotuit a pboerlm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Azanmig huh? yaeh and I awlyas tghuhot slpeling was ipmorantt.

Summary

- Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects.

- Soft skills not only include personal skills but also include interpersonal skills.

- Communication is the process of transferring information from a sender to a receiver with the use of a medium.

- E-mail is one of the most popular communication methods.

- While using e-mails we should be careful about the subject line, content and identification.

- While writing e-mails we should keep in mind the cultural diversity.

- Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person in a way that improves mutual understanding.

EXERCISES

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

1. Name some of the stages of communication in which errors may crop in.

2. What is the importance of feedback in communication?

3. List some factors responsible for misinterpretation of messages by the receiver.

4. What is meant by context in relation to communication?

5. What is the use of subject line in e-mails?

6. Why should one be careful about cultural diversity while writing salutation in an e-mail?

7. What is meant by signature in an e-mail?

8. What is auto message responder?

9. What is an e-mail attachment?

10. Why is proofing important?

LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

1. What is the need for effective communication? Elucidate some of the key aspects by having a group discussion with our fellow classmates.

2. Do we agree that if one has best knowledge of computer tools and techniques he/she will be a good communicator also? Support our answer with examples from your experience.

3. What are the various cultural diversities we should be sensitive towards in our communication with others? Support your answers with examples from the Indian context or global context.

4. What are the key things that we should keep in mind while sending an e-mail to a person who requires attachments of multi-media contents.

5. Discuss some etiquette that one should follow while writing.

6. What are the key points that one should remember while video-conferencing?

7. Discuss the importance of listening.

8. With a suitable example, elucidate the meaning of Chunking?

Activities

1. Form two groups with the names "Sender" and "Receiver" and bring out the main points of effective computer communication technology.

2. Within a group of not more than eight members share examples of "effective e-mail" and "ineffective e-mail" in your class.

3. If we are making a video-call to a person in Washington, what are the key things that we should keep in mind? Have a discussion within your peer group to establish the importance of time-lines and cultural diversity in communication.