

Barriers to electronic communication



Electronic communication plays a vital role within organisations, and more recently, is becoming a preferred method of social interactions between individuals. Unlike face-to-face communication, individuals rely on technology to channel their message which can create additional complexities uncommon in face-to-face interactions. Intrapersonal, interpersonal, semantic, and physical barriers are more likely to occur in electronic communication because of different interpretations, absence of non-verbal behaviour or cues, and access to technological resources.

This essay will examine all four communication barriers and discuss how different people's experiences, expectations and attitudes affect the way electronic communication is composed and interpreted. It will look at barriers caused by demographics, and consider how the use of language and absence of non-verbal behaviour can cause the message to be misinterpreted. And finally, the essay will examine how environmental noise, insufficient resources, and information overload can disrupt concentration creating a barrier to successful communication.

Intrapersonal barriers occur within the self, and are more common in electronic communication due to different perceptions and expectations. These psychological barriers usually stem from a person's life experience and can influence their thought patterns on a subconscious level. An individual's world view regarding technology may lead them to expect that everyone has a similar level of proficiency with electronic resources, or assume that the receiver will interpret their message exactly as it was intended.

In a case study conducted within a university setting, Jerram et al. (2002) examine the use of email and explain that assumptions between senders and receivers played a major role in creating misunderstandings as the meaning was often implied, and both parties assumed their different perspectives were shared. These assumptions can lead to stereotyping based on perceived characteristics of others.

For example, if an electronic communication is not interpreted or responded to in the way the sender intended, the sender may make a superficial judgment about the receiver which broadens the communication barrier.

Taylor (cited in Tyler, Kossen & Ryan 2005, p. 29) states ‘ Attitude is another major shaping or organising force in the way we perceive information, ourselves and others and it refers to a predisposition to respond to stimuli in a particular way’.

Negative experiences between people or with technology can create pessimistic outlooks, which prevent skill development and contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies and avoidance behaviours. As a result, intrapersonal barriers diminish the effectiveness of electronic communication leading to misinterpretations and unproductive interactions. Interpersonal barriers occur more often in electronic communication due to different demographics and conflicting interests.

These barriers arise from personal differences and incompatibilities between individuals such as age, gender, and culture leading to conflicting viewpoints or beliefs which impede communication. In a study examining older people’s use of email and internet chat, Gatto & Tak 2008 explain that while older

adults may enjoy online interactions with family and friends, they can become frustrated when using technology due to physical or mental limitations, and find that detailed conversations are prevented because responses have to be typed.

In contrast, younger adults are generally more proficient using electronic communication devices. Younger females are more likely to use instant messaging or texting for social purposes and often compose long messages, while younger males become disillusioned with social texting and prefer to use mobile devices for information gathering and planning (Baron & Campbell 2012).

Cultural factors such as different language systems, beliefs, and values, also create interpersonal barriers to communication. For example, individuals in Hong Kong value shared loyalty and relationships and primarily use the internet for social purposes, whereas individuals from Arab countries may place a lesser importance on using technology to communicate as they prefer face-to-face interactions and value family time (Leidner & Kayworth 2006).

This suggests that cultural values and personal differences shape attitudes towards communication technology and how it is utilized. Therefore, demographic factors and incompatibilities between individuals create conflicts of interest and form interpersonal barriers to successful electronic communication. Semantic barriers are barriers relating to the meaning of words, and are more common in electronic communication due to the misinterpretation of language, and absence of non-verbal behaviour.

Semantic barriers arise when there is a misunderstanding of words and unfamiliar terms or jargon used between the sender and receiver. Fandrych 2007 suggests that electronic communication such as email, internet chat and mobile texting is distinctly different from normal written communication, and is often made up of colloquial language, abbreviations, acronyms and symbols which may appear to be a completely different language making very little sense to the non-initiate.

In addition, abbreviated words, poor spelling and poor grammar can lead to ambiguity and create double meanings causing the message to be misinterpreted. For example, 'lol' at the end of a message may mean 'laugh out loud' or could also mean 'lots of love' which creates a double meaning and may cause some confusion for the receiver. Taylor, Kossen & Ryan (2005, p. 271) state that semantic barriers in communication also occur at a connotative level as the emotional tone of the message can be misinterpreted.

In face-to-face communication, non-verbal behaviour such as body language and gestures may assist the receiver to interpret a message where there is some confusion about the emotional tone or the language used, however in electronic communication such as email, internet chat and mobile texting these cues are absent making it more difficult to interpret the message. Ducheneaut 2002 states that email use in organisations provides fewer cues about interactions, physical context or social roles than face-to-face communication making it more difficult to interpret the intentions of the sender and misunderstandings are more difficult to resolve.

Therefore, semantic barriers in electronic communication may cause confusion, misunderstandings, and lead to ineffective interactions between people. Physical barriers are barriers which occur within the physical environment, and are more common in electronic communication due to information overload, environmental noise, and insufficient resources. Physical barriers include any material or environmental factors which cause distractions or contribute to loss of concentration impeding the communication process.

Tyler, Kossen & Ryan (2005, p. 51) state that one of the most common complaints about email is the volume of junk mail a person receives which may lead them to delay reading the message or to delete the message without reading it, thus running a risk that important mail is mistakenly ignored or deleted. This type of information overload, in addition to pop-up advertisements can cause a considerable distraction resulting in miscommunication. Distractions can often delay the receiver's response time which may create an intrapersonal barrier where the sender assumes the message is being ignored, or the receiver is uninterested.

Environmental noises such as static in the phone line and auditory notifications of social networks, as well as technological issues such as access to proper equipment or equipment malfunction can also cause disruptions and lead to communication breakdown. In a study examining barriers to distance education, Dabaj 2011 explains that both teachers and students can be affected by technical problems such as insufficient experience with the technology, bandwidth limitations, and poorly designed

web programs resulting in a barrier to effective communication and a decrease in student learning.

As a result, physical barriers can cause considerable disruptions to electronic communication leading to unsuccessful interactions between individuals. In summary, electronic communication is a growing trend in both the business sector and in the social lives of individuals, therefore it is vital to understand how communication barriers affect electronic interactions. An individual's own life experience creates different expectations, assumptions and attitudes towards others and technology, leading to intrapersonal or psychological barriers that greatly affect the way electronic communication is composed and interpreted.

Furthermore, personal differences and incompatibilities between people such as age, gender and culture create interpersonal barriers which lead to conflicting interests and greatly influence how electronic communication is utilized. Also, the absence of non-verbal behaviour gives fewer cues to the emotional tone or intent of the electronic message adding to the confusion already created by poor spelling, the use of colloquial language and abbreviations which can lead to double meanings and misinterpretations.

Finally, insufficient access to technology or inadequate knowledge can create physical barriers to electronic communication significantly disrupting communication while the high volume of junk mail, pop-up advertisements, and environmental noise from online notifications and phone line static leads to distractions and loss of concentration. Therefore, it can be concluded that

the four communication barriers are more likely to occur in electronic communication than in face-to-face communication.