



Visit, Call or Email?

At a recent workshop I was leading there was a great deal of discussion about the number of interruptions that frequently impact our productivity. Interestingly, when invited to volunteer the most despised type of interruption, some people nominated email, some nominated telephone calls and some nominated visits from other people. For most professionals our one-on-one communication comes down to a choice between these three media. How do we make smart choices when we know that we may risk “interrupting” someone?

Here are some guidelines for selecting the appropriate medium:

- Think of your own personal preference. Some of us are more comfortable, all things being equal, composing emails rather than stammering over the phone (or vice versa).
- Think of the other person’s preference. If we don’t know them well, look for clues. A handy principle is to employ the same medium that they used in making contact with you, if they initiated the communication. So, for example, if they phoned you I recommend that you phone them back.
- Consider the time of day. If it is late in the afternoon, for example, a visit or a phone call may not be as effective as an email if the message can be dealt with when the other person arrives at work early the next morning.
- Consider your track record. If a particular medium is not working, even if it is your favourite, try something else. If a person is not responding to your first three emails I suggest it’s time to pick up the phone.
- Check the temperature. If it appears that the quality of the communication is deteriorating, try something else. If you (or the other person) is experiencing some frustration on the telephone it is probably time to meet in person.
- Consider the risks of misunderstanding. If it is an important communication the time involved in a face-to-face meeting may well be worth spending to ensure that both parties are clear and satisfied with the outcome.

It is useful to reflect on the preferences of different personality types. At risk of oversimplification, sales and marketing people like telephone calls and design and analysis people like email. There are clear implications for the seating arrangements in organisations. I am sure that the atmosphere will be far more effective if the “talkers” were grouped together – and separated from the group of “emailers”. It will also be enhanced if each group understood and appreciated their different styles.

The probability of successful communication will be far greater if we can be flexible in our communication methods and then make smart choices as to what is most suitable.