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ACS TODAY

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Effective Communication in a Post-Pandemic Work Environment: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The COVID-19 pandemic forced employers and employees in many industries to think differently about the way we all work. Some businesses were able to work remotely, and their employees had to adjust to that reality. This meant Zoom meetings instead of in person meetings, more phone calls instead of passing one another at the water cooler or in the hallway, and managing all the activity without being face to face. When workers began to return to offices as the COVID-19 pandemic receded, communication at the workplace for everyone demanded yet another shift. In short, the office has forever changed, and communication in this hybrid world is a challenge that must be acknowledged.

What we do know is that whether you're an introvert or extrovert, effective communication is key to a harmonious work environment. Poor communication by management or between co-workers can lead to low productivity, unhappy employees, and retention issues. In fact, a study by Salesforce.com shows that 86 percent of employees, corporate executives, and educators believe ineffective communication is the underlying reason for failures within the work environment.

So why does it seem like so many of us are having trouble with communication? In this newsletter, Advocacy & Communication Solutions (ACS) will answer that question. We will look at why communication is so important in the work environment and give you tips and tools to help you become a communication superstar.

SECTION 1:
Are we bad at communicating?

In today's world of cell phones, virtual meetings, and Snapchats instead of handshakes and in-person connections, human skills (i.e., soft or interpersonal skills) are taking a hit.

While it is imperative that employees have the technical skills (i.e., hard skills) required for their jobs—such as writing, reading, computer skills, math—it is equally if not more important for employees to possess human skills, like being an effective communicator. In a LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends 2019 report of talent professionals, 92 percent reported that human skills are equally or more important to hire for than technical skills; 89 percent said that when a new hire doesn't work out, it's because they lack critical human skills.

LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends 2019 report of talent professionals

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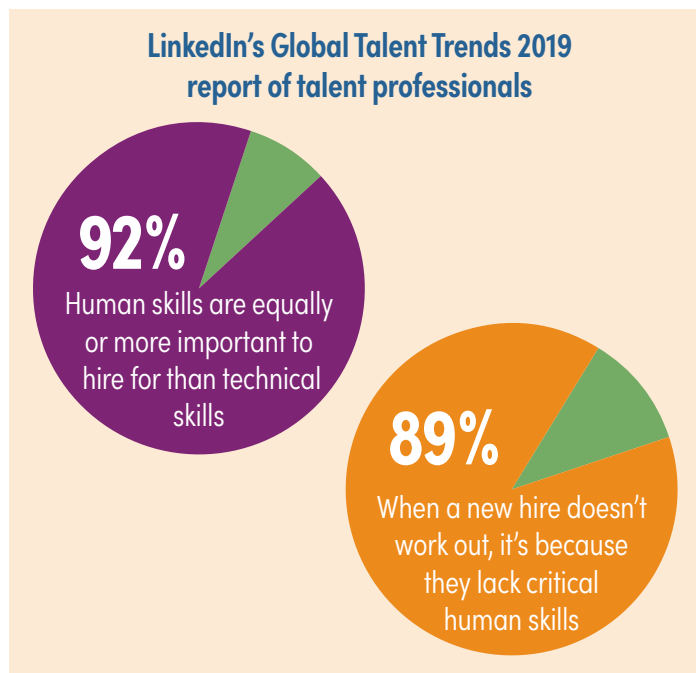
So why does it seem that we are so bad at one of the most important human skills—communication? There are myriad possible reasons why, but the pandemic and our increasing reliance on and use of technology seem to be two of the key issues.

> Human skills relate to how you interact with others, such as interpersonal (people) skills, communication skills, listening skills, time management, problem-solving, leadership, and empathy. Because nearly every job requires engagement with others in some capacity, human skills are important and necessary to an employee's success.

COVID-19 changed our ways of working and communicating.

Virtual meetings (camera off). Direct messaging. Work from home. These are some of the tools that became increasingly utilized in the work environment when COVID-19 hit the world in 2020. And while many of the technological tools were already in place in offices and companies around the world, the pandemic forced employers and employees alike to shift their use into hyperdrive. We all had to get a whole lot better at working in a digital world as our access to in-person, face-to-face interactions disappeared practically overnight.

WFH Research Survey

weekly work time from home
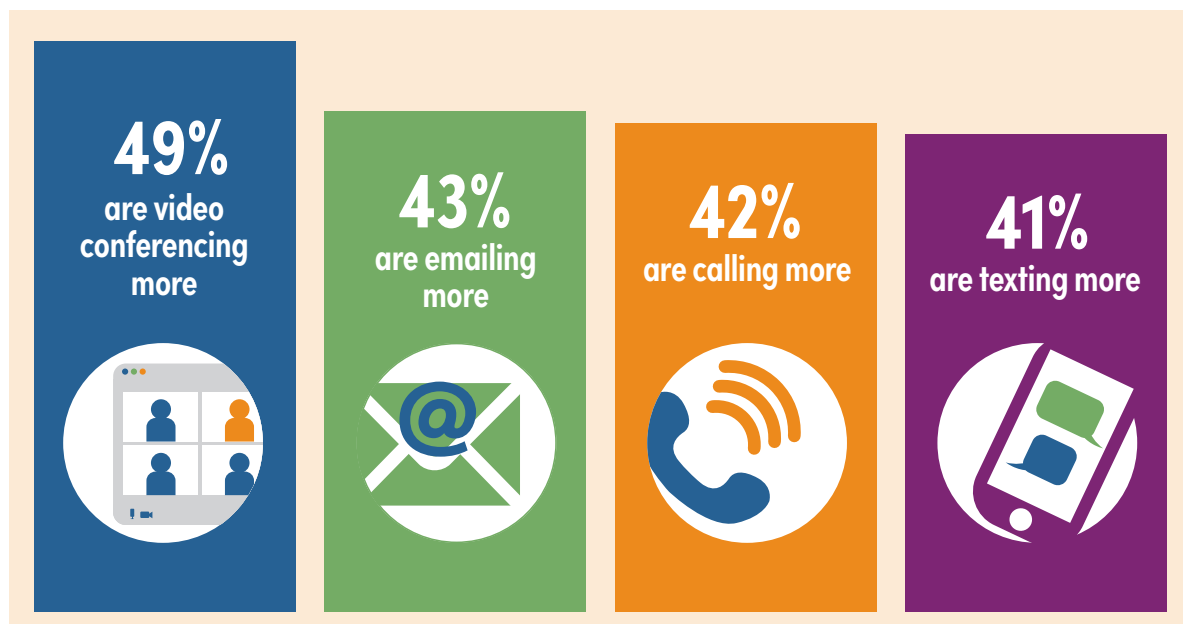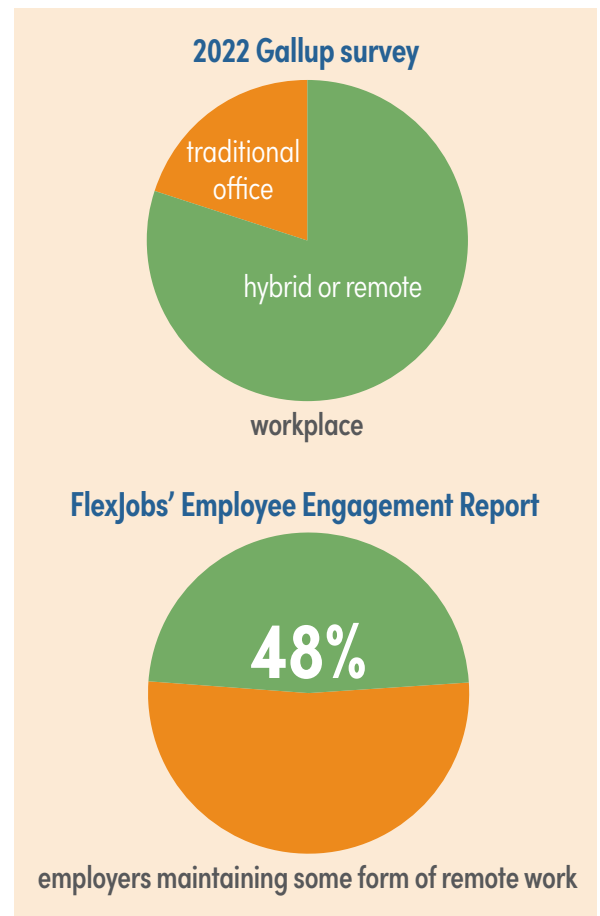
30%

2019   2023
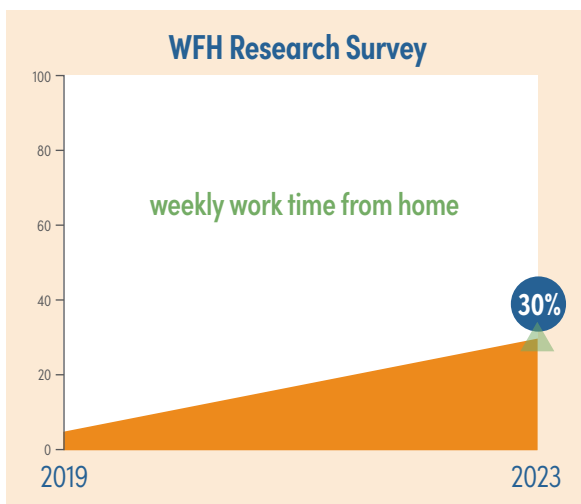
While in-person interaction and communication are becoming more commonplace now that 69 percent of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19[1], it's clear that remote work isn't going away anytime soon. A data-collection project by WFH Research found that among those surveyed, 30 percent of their weekly work time was from home in January of 2023, six times higher than in 2019.

[1]https://usafacts.org/visualizations/covid-vaccine-tracker-states

And a Gallup survey in June 2022 found that 8 in 10 people who have remote-capable jobs are working hybrid or remote, while only 2 in 10 are in a traditional office. According to FlexJobs' Employee Engagement Report, 48 percent of employers are maintaining some form of remote work for their workforce.

Virtual and electronic communication has a stronger place in the work environment than ever before and data indicates this shift in communication will never return to pre-pandemic "norms." In a June 2022 study conducted by Grammarly, of 1,000 currently employed U.S. professionals between the ages of 18 and 65 asked about the impact pandemic-driven communication changes had on their communication, almost half of respondents (unsurprisingly) reported communicating less in-person and more through electronic means:

2022 Gallup survey

traditional office

hybrid or remote

workplace

FlexJobs' Employee Engagement Report

48%

employers maintaining some form of remote work

49%
are video conferencing more

43%
are emailing more

42%
are calling more

41%
are texting more

Despite seeing people in-person less, we're all doing more communicating than ever before, making it even more important that we continue adjusting to and thriving in a largely virtual communication environment.

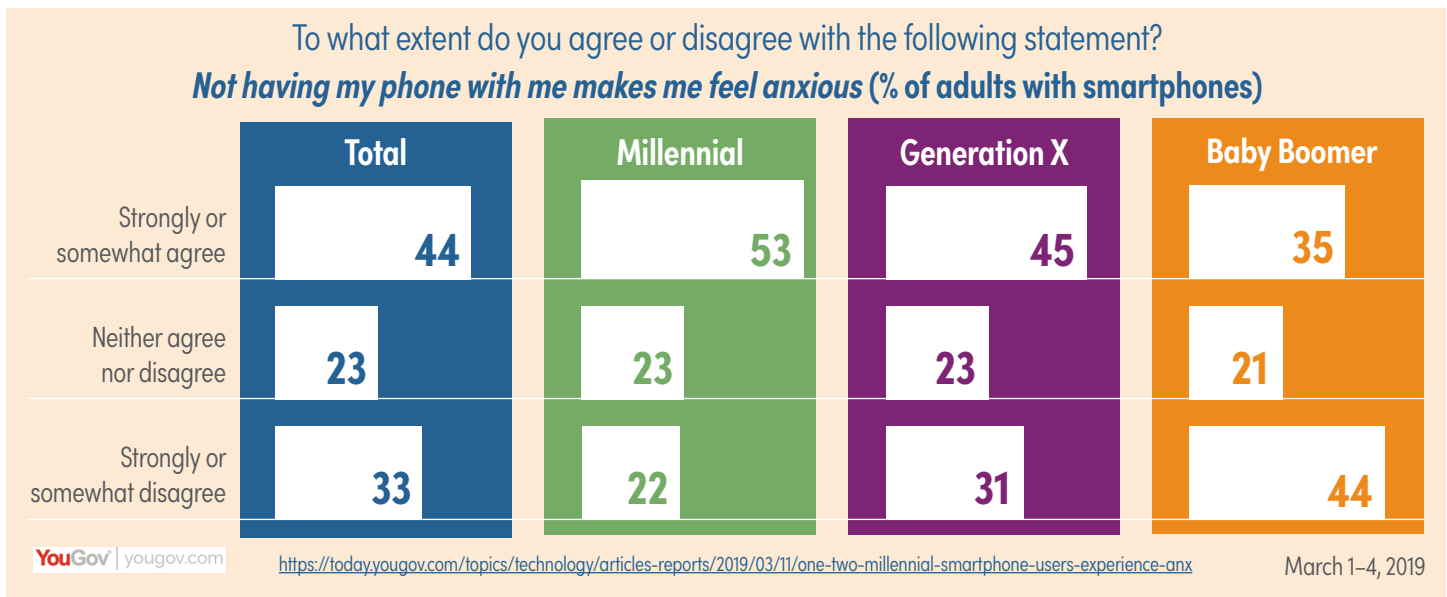## Did technology kill the communication star?

Technology has undoubtedly enhanced the way we communicate in our work environments—we can work from anywhere, be available at any time, and communicate with literally anyone in the world. Technology has also allowed those who may have historically had trouble communicating in a traditional work environment the chance to do so in a safe and inclusive space.

Technology has greatly impacted the ability for people with disabilities to join conversations, allowing them the opportunity to participate in the work environment in truly meaningful ways. The article, _Working Together: People with Disabilities and Computer Technology,_ states "A wide variety of technology has been created to diminish or eliminate barriers faced by people with disabilities, especially barriers related to computers and technology. Hardware and software tools—known as assistive technology—can aid in tasks such as reading and writing documents, communicating with others, and searching for information online."

But what has technology taken away from our ability to be effective communicators?In the article, _The Negative Impact That Growing Up Digital Has Had on Communication,_ the authors break down into four key points the negative impacts that technology has had on what used to be basic communication skills.

1. **We do not like making eye contact.**

   When was the last time you had a conversation with someone who repeatedly scrolled their phone while you were talking? Phones make it easy to break eye contact, which is an integral part of the communication process. People feel connected to their phones, and when they are not utilizing them or are away from them, they feel anxious, and have difficulty concentrating. The chart below shows just how anxiety-inducing that separation is.

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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
Not having my phone with me makes me feel anxious (% of adults with smartphones)

	Total	Millennial	Generation X	Baby Boomer
Strongly or somewhat agree	44	53	45	35
Neither agree nor disagree	23	23	23	21
Strongly or somewhat disagree	33	22	31	44

YouGov | yougov.com

https://today.yougov.com/topics/technology/articles-reports/2019/03/11/one-two-millennial-smartphone-users-experience-anx

March 1–4, 2019

What this chart doesn't show is *why* people are so anxious without their phones nearby. It may not be that they desire to have their technology close at hand, rather the anxiety stems from their need to be reachable. With the onset of technology comes the belief that we are (or should be) constantly accessible, and this means—for some—never sending your boss to voicemail.

2. **We avoid face-to-face communication.**

   Gone are the days when you pop into someone's office to request a favor. Now you send an email, text, or direct message. But is that more effective? Studies say no. Research recently published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology found that a face-to-face request is 34 times more successful than an email. Yet most people prefer to communicate electronically.

3. **We're uncomfortable with non-digital conversations.**

   Human beings hate being vulnerable. We will avoid feeling vulnerable at all costs. However, technology allows us to tweak messages until exactly the right tone, word choice, and use of periods and exclamation points makes them (we hope) perfect—and *then* we hit send. Non-digital

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conversations force us to be vulnerable and cause us to lose control (or feel like we're losing control) of the communication.

4. **We shield ourselves from conflict and conflict resolution.**

    Using technology helps us avoid conflict; we can control the message, usually control our emotions, and walk away, if needed. But we need to be cautious about learning to consistently avoid conflict and conflict resolution, which lessens our ability to handle challenging situations when they arise.

So we're not exactly *bad* at communication, but the tools we rely on every day have both the power to connect and to disconnect.

Bad communication can make for costly consequences

So what can *bad* communication do to a work environment? Unfortunately, a lot of harm. Ineffective communication can actually cost the employer money.

David Grossman reported in his article *The Cost of Poor Communications*[2] that a company with 100,000 employees averages a loss of $62.4 million annually due to miscommunication.

$62.4 Million

Debra Hamilton reported in her article *Top Ten Email Blunders that Cost Companies Money*[3] that a company with 100 employees averages a loss of $420,000 annually due to miscommunication.

$420,000

28 percent of employees point to poor communication as the reason for breached deadlines[4].

28%
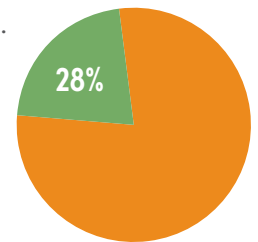
[2]David Grossman, "The Cost of Poor Communications," The Holmes Report, July17, 2011.

[3]Debra Hamilton, "Top Ten Email Blunders That Cost Companies Money," Creative Communications & Training, 2010.

[4]https://yourbusiness.azcentral.com/communication-affects-productivity-statistics-27004.html

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SECTION 2:
How can YOU be a better communicator?

Practice makes perfect!

Learning to be a better communicator doesn't happen overnight, particularly given the hurdles mentioned above. Incremental steps can put you on the path to becoming a better communicator, which in turn will help you become a better employer, employee, and co-worker.

In the article, [7 tips for effective communication in the workplace](#), the author provides the following tips on how to make small changes to your communication habits that will yield big results.

1. **Know where to communicate—and about what.**

   Communication happens in many different forms; make sure the format fits the need

2. **Build collaboration skills.**

   Practice open and honest communication. This doesn't necessarily mean always agreeing on things. Know how to disagree and work through those differences.

3. **Talk face-to-face when you can.**

   If your team is virtual, speak via video conferencing.

4. **Watch your body language and tone of voice.**

   Make sure you aren't crossing your arms or coming off in a negative or unintended way. Particularly for hard conversations, try to relax to avoid giving off any unintentional cues.

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5. **Prioritize two-way communication.**

Listen to other people's ideas rather than trying to put your own ideas out there. Make sure you are listening to understand and not to reply.

6. **Stick to facts, not stories.**

"Facts" are things that have actually happened. A "story" is your interpretation of the situation. Try to separate stories from facts.

7. **Make sure you're speaking to the right person.**

Poor communication often occurs when you're talking to the wrong people or trying to share information in the wrong setting. To avoid this, make sure the right people are in the room or receiving the message.

There are two common types of listening:

Listening to understand—
focus is on listening to what the other person has to say without thinking about how you're going to reply. If you do think of something you want to say, write it down so you can go back instead of trying to remember the thing you want to say next.

Listening to reply—
focus is on what you're going to say next, rather than what the other person is saying. You risk missing key information or even repeating what the other person just said.

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SECTION 3:
Tools that can help you become a better communicator!

Now you know the reasons so many of us are having trouble with communication and why good communication in the work environment is so important. You've also learned how you can become a better communicator. Now it's time to look at tools that will help you along your path to becoming a communication superstar.

Tool 1: Active Listening Techniques
The ACS tool Active Listening Techniques can help you communicate with any type of communicator. This tool will teach you how to build your skills to be a better listener.

Tool 2: 10 Tips for an Effective Communication Approach
The ACS tool 10 Tips for an Effective Communication Approach walks you through 10 points to keep in mind as you create or modify your communication approach.

Change is Constant, but Communication is Forever.

Communication is constantly changing. Technology, pandemics, and all the other things life throws at us can drastically change where, how, and even with whom we are communicating. But learning to be an effective communicator—and learning how to communicate with those who don't communicate as effectively—is a skill you can apply on any communication platform.

So maybe technology didn't kill the communication star! With ACS' help, you'll become the communicator of your dreams.

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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Winter 2023 Newsletter

Fall 2022 Newsletter

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