

# Computer-Mediated Communication for Business



# Computer-Mediated Communication for Business:

*Theory to Practice*

Edited by

Stephanie Kelly

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Computer-Mediated Communication for Business: Theory to Practice

Edited by Stephanie Kelly

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3805-2

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3805-4

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# FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Many years ago when I was a graduate student, my mentor Dr. David Westerman posited to me that computer-mediated communication (CMC) was not only as effective as face-to-face communication, but that when used skillfully it could be even more effective. Of course, knowing that Dr. Westerman was always correct, I readily agreed with him on the spot. It took a few years for me to fully appreciate why he was correct though.

I would dare say that even at this time in my life that the majority of professional CMC I have engaged in has not been superior to face-to-face communication. In fact, in many cases it has been less effective for a variety of reasons such as misunderstanding in message tone or frustration with the time lag experienced waiting for follow-up questions to be answered. The reality of the business world is that few professionals have formal communication training, and those that do have had more training on formatting documents than thinking critically about sending and receiving messages through mediated channels.

Now, as an Associate Professor who teaches communication in a business college every semester, I find that I must supplement my business communication courses with much more material than my students really want to read, because I have not found a resource that focuses on how the skillful use of communication can make CMC for business even more effective than face-to-face interactions. Rather, most business communication texts have focused on demarcating the inherent differences between face-to-face and CMC and given a list of guidelines for working via email or social media. Thus, in building this book, I had two goals:

1. To introduce established and emerging professionals to communication theories that allow us to predict and explain CMC.
2. To provide a CMC reference tailored to professionals that gives practical advice for handling the wide variety of CMC situations they are likely to experience through work.



As such, the goal of this text is to guide you through theory to practice for business CMC.

I hope you find this resource to be as useful as it was intended to be. It has been an honor to work with the experts who contributed to this book from a variety of fields including communication, psychology, engineering, and philosophy. I sincerely hope that you enjoy reading their insights as much as I did.

Sincerely,  
Stephanie Kelly



**SECTION 1:**

**HUMAN TO HUMAN CONNECTIONS  
THROUGH TECHNOLOGY**

# CHAPTER ONE

## FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES BROUGHT BY COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

ZHENYANG LUO AND JUSTIN WALDEN  
NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

More than at any other point, employees should understand the transformative effects of digital technology on business and on their lives. An oft-cited industry research report shows that adults in the United States spend, on average, just over 12 hours per day with major media platforms (eMarketer, 2017). Our reliance on technology takes on addictive traits, as studies suggest the average employee checks email 77 times each day and sends 4.73 messages, texts, or emails during a typical in-person meeting (Wadhwa, 2018). Theorists such as Gregg (2011) have argued that technology enables work to creep into personal spaces and that portable devices such as smartphones give organizations new power to monitor employees outside of work. We should consider the burnout and privacy risks associated with the seemingly nonstop growth of digital technologies. However, we also note that the guided use of tools such as Slack, Zoom, and SharePoint can contribute to employee engagement, facilitate task completion, and improve how employees feel about their organizations.

In this chapter, professionals are informed about the fundamental changes in human communication brought about by computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. We review technology's impact on the delivery of helpful contextual cues in messages, whether and how intimacy can be felt through communication technologies, and how communication exchanges play out over time between peers. To begin your journey in reading how these changes are impacting business, we review three dominant classes of CMC technology: instant messaging, videoconferencing, and social media.

## **Cues in CMC**

Cues are basic elements of a message that help individuals understand what others are trying to convey. For example, if you run into a colleague and ask, “How are you today?”, the cues from that question could include voice tone, eye contact, and hand gestures. Cues can be categorized into verbal (e.g., words used in a message) and nonverbal (e.g., body movement and diction) and apply to both CMC and face-to-face (FtF) situations. Scholars have long held that CMC may “filter out” common and important cues that are apparent when we speak to someone in the same physical space (Walther, 1996). Technology is often designed in a such way that it strips out common non-verbal indicators about a communicator’s intended meaning. For example, if you were to raise an eyebrow in a FtF situation, it would likely have a clear and easily understood meaning. Yet in CMC, there are no directly comparable cues to convey that same message.

CMC can also “filter in” meaningful cues that are not available in FtF situations. For example, a simple mouse click on social media can convey something important to a peer. These cues include hitting “like” in Facebook, “favorite” in Twitter, and “upvote” in Reddit. These cues are unique to social media technologies and are what Hayes, Carr and Wohn (2016) referred to as paralinguistic digital affordances (PDA). There are generally four motivations behind PDA use: Conveying a literal meaning that the user “likes” or wants to “upvote” content; acknowledging that an individual has read or viewed content; displaying support to a friend; and using the PDA as a form of personal archiving in which the content is stored for later use (Hayes et al., 2016). In addition to social media, there are unique message features in other communication technologies such as emojis in instant messages and the tagging function in Slack. These non-verbal cues contribute to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships by enabling individuals to develop an understanding about what someone is trying to say.

## **Intimacy of communication technologies**

Because we can learn so much about an individual through face-to-face (FtF) communication, these types of interactions are generally considered intimate. On the flip side, CMC has historically been viewed as impersonal and cold. But should the latter always be the case? The concept of media richness suggests different technologies have different capabilities when it comes to shaping closeness and a sense of presence between individuals.

Media richness refers to a communication technology's abilities to 1) overcome communication constraints of time and distance and to 2) convey nonverbal cues of a communication partner (Rice, 1992). For example, a phone call involves a more synchronous exchange than an email exchange. Yet a video conferencing call, where we can see the person on the other side of the line, should allow for the sharing of more contextual information than a basic voice phone call. The more a technology can overcome time and distance boundaries and convey cues, the more intimate or "warmer" the technology will be perceived.

The intimacy of technology is important in workplace CMC for several reasons, including the ability to complete tasks, team cohesiveness, and the formation of peer relationships. Walther and Bazarova (2008) tested the relationship between media richness and how close individuals felt to each other. When there was only one channel available (i.e., text-based chat, audio, video or FtF communication), there was no difference in the perceived psychological closeness reported by study participants. However, when multiple channels were available, partners reported higher level of closeness with using a rich medium than with using just a plain medium. So, it is not necessarily the richer the better, the availability of several media channels also plays a role in felt closeness.

## **Time in communication**

Is there a more frustrating experience than having a rapid-fire email or text exchange with a colleague when they suddenly and inexplicably walk away from the conversation? A defining characteristic of CMC is that it involves "asynchronous media," which are systems that allow one communicator to create a message at one point in time and message recipients to consume the message later (Walther, 2011). When two people are not in the same physical space at the same time, each has power to read and respond to messages at their own convenience. Although the rise of timestamps in emails, social media, and chats has made it easier to know *when* someone is available and engaged online, there are still important synchronicity issues in CMC.

Social information processing theory (SIPT) offers a relevant perspective on the ways in which individuals interact online over time. SIPT holds that even when basic visual cues are not present (as is common in CMC situations), we develop relationships with our peers by finding new ways to interact with them (Walther, 2008). In online communication, we make

greater use of written cues to understand each other than we typically do in face-to-face situations (Walther, 2008). These written cues include an individual's writing style, how often they send messages, the length of messages, selection of words, and increasingly, their use of emojis. Although this reliance on written cues can lengthen the time it takes to develop a relationship with one's peers, it showcases how the time and cues-related limitations associated with CMC may not be as prevalent as scholars and managers originally feared. Relationships that start online or primarily involve online communication are no less meaningful or important for getting work done. However, as SIPT suggests, it takes longer for these relationships to solidify.

A robust amount of research shows (c.f., Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016 and Sias, 2005) that the quality of the relationships that one has with their peers, supervisors, and employers is a significant predictor of work performance. Thus, the better one feels about their colleagues and bosses, the more likely they are to perform high quality work. Because it can take more time to understand each other when relationships are primarily online, organizations should foster team building and support employees when they are physically separated from each other. This can overcome the time-related limitations that are traditionally associated with technology.

## **Instant messaging**

Scholars initially worried that CMC was inferior to FtF communication because of the limited availability of commonly-understood cues. However, as we have hopefully shown to this point, these concerns are largely being addressed. This change is most notable with instant messaging (IM), which has morphed from the early text-dominated design of ICQ to today's information-rich Facebook messenger and Slack apps. IM apps allow two individuals to connect and interact directly, a sort of chatroom for two (Jacobson, 2007). No longer constrained to desktop computers, IM platforms have found widespread use on smartphones, which allows individuals to communicate and complete tasks on the go. With IM, an exchange can either be in real-time or an individual may read and respond to messages on their own time.

In addition to providing a means of communicating synchronously across physical space, IM apps afford users a chance to engage in self-expression in multiple ways. For example, many platforms have features

that enable individuals to customize their user profile (Jacobson, 2007). This can include a bio and a photo, which provides subtle details about an individual's identity. Additionally, emojis—those tiny characters that can easily be dropped into a chat—allow us to express our emotions and thoughts online. Emojis have found their way from our personal cell phones and private chats into work tools such as Slack and Flock. These digital icons offer even more contextual information for our coworkers to decipher in a chat. And finally, availability indicators and auto-generated responses signal whether someone is online and available to chat (Darics, 2014). This helps us manage our conversations throughout the workday. Collectively, these tools give users a chance to control the pace and content of conversations, yet they must also be clearly understood by the other party in order for them to be effective.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

Because messages are preserved in many IM platforms, conversations can serve as a type of virtual “sticky note” in which users may not respond immediately to a message but they do indicate their progress on projects (Darics, 2014). Chats in these platforms can be revisited by employees throughout the workday since the chat text is typically preserved in the app. Even though a message may not generate an immediate response, an ongoing discussion that plays out over several hours in IM can actually help teams because it contributes to feelings of co-presence among team members who are not in the same physical space (Darics, 2014). Even though we may get frustrated when a colleague does not immediately respond to a message, it is still reassuring to know that they are “out there” in the virtual world during the day and these messages can be helpful reference points on projects.

## **Videoconferencing**

Videoconferencing tools such as Skype and FaceTime are staples in business communication for many of the same reasons that organizations use instant messaging. These platforms enable instant communication between members of virtual teams and can save businesses money because they lessen the need for travel. Traditionally set up in fixed rooms or studios, videoconferencing systems are now used by mobile phone users to connect to meetings when they are out of the office (Denstadli, Julsrud & Hjorthol, 2012). In many systems, illustrations and documents can be shared and revised by chat participants (Denstadli et al., 2012). This adds a level of



richness and detail to the user's experience that helps make conversations via video helpful in completing tasks. Videoconferencing is considered a rich medium because it provides more visual cues than basic audio-only systems and has been shown to contribute to employee perceptions of two-way communication in organizations (Lee, 2018). These tools can greatly contribute to the flow of information in organizations and help employees feel like they have a major voice in company affairs.

Videoconferencing is also valuable because it can contribute to social presence. With presence, an individual feels like they are "there" with others, even though they are in another location. In education, learners use videoconferencing to be seen and heard by peers in a shared online workspace (Giesbers, Rienties, Gijssels, Segers, & Tempelaar, 2009). Similar to education settings, videoconferencing tools in the workplace facilitate interactions between virtual teams and allow individuals who are located elsewhere to engage in informal, casual interaction (Lee & Takayama, 2011). This can strengthen the bonds between remotely-situated coworkers and help them socialize.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

There were initial limitations with this technology. For example, Hinds (1999) found that videoconferencing required additional cognitive processing when individuals were trying to complete tasks compared to task completion using only audio communication. This increased the likelihood of information overload and biased social judgments about one's peers (Hinds, 1999). Yet as videoconferencing has become more widely used in business, our expectations and uses of the technology have evolved. Recently, research concluded that videoconferencing allows for richer and more open communication on projects than traditional phone-based conferencing (Scott, 2013). Videoconferencing allows people to meet more frequently in real-time, which can help build trust and manage conflict in teams (Scott, 2013).

## **Social media**

Historically, scholars have categorized communication tools based on their defining characteristics. If a channel facilitates two-way communication, it is considered interpersonal (e.g., telephone and email); if a channel transfers a message to a large audience, it is mass communication (e.g., radio and television). However, things are not so clear anymore and a new

type of communication has emerged: “Masspersonal.” One big example of masspersonal communication channel is social media. A message posted on social media can simultaneously have high level of accessibility (how public the receiver believes the message is), and also a high level of personalization (the degree of customization of the message) (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018). For example, on Facebook, a post targeted for a small group of people (high personalization) can also been seen by all the other “friends” (high accessibility). These personalization and accessibility considerations are critical to managing social media at work. Organizations have struggled with the introduction of social media into the workplace because employees often do not agree on whether social media enhances or harms productivity and because social media contributes to the erosion of privacy boundaries between coworkers (Walden, 2016).

In addressing the impact of social media on users, communication scholars have often been influenced by sociologist Erving Goffman. In a seminal text from 1959, Goffman wrote that individuals interact with each other as if they were performing in a theatrical play. We act out different roles based on who in the audience that we think is responding to us (e.g., friends, family members, coworkers) and how these audiences view us. When we are in the same physical space as someone, this self-presentation is easy to manage because we can easily see how our audiences are responding to us. However, in social media, the “temporal, spatial, and social boundaries” (Vitak, 2012) of our networks can be easily broken, and different audience groups (e.g., childhood friends, family members, high school classmates and colleagues) are flattened into one single audience group. This phenomenon is called context collapse (Vitak, 2012). This can greatly impact what we say to our coworkers in and out of the workplace. This can also influence who we allow into our various social networks.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

Each time we post in social media, we perform in front of an audience—be it real or imagined. Yet the audience we think of (our “imagined audience”) is likely only a small subset of the actual audience. If we want to hide certain traits or behaviors from one group, there is a risk that we will inadvertently share it with other groups. However, some opportunities for meaningful relationship development exist. For example, since the audience in social media is diverse, if you are perceived by one group in a positive manner (e.g., warm, knowledgeable, or friendly), this is likely to extend to other groups. There are also serendipitous ways of connecting with new

people given the mix of audiences that meet online. A comment left on a friend's wall could be the starting point for a new friendship with another individual or group.

## Final thoughts

There is no 'one size fits all approach' to managing workplace technology use, as it is naïve to think that employees will respond the same to each communication situation that takes place online or through in-person chats. Yet we hope our review of the fundamentals of CMC will help managers and frontline employees begin to consider the role of CMC as a tool and influence of our professional lives. Professionals in general should develop a level of sensitivity about the affordances and functions of each communication technology. These affordances and functions may be actively used to enhance communication with one's peers and understanding them can help avoid embarrassing mistakes. Organizations need to develop comprehensive information technology strategies that account for each tool's respective strengths and that keep the end user's communication needs in mind. CMC technologies can be a crucial driver of organizational success provided the right tools are put in the hands of employees who know how to best utilize them.

## Tips

1. Employees should periodically assess their technology use in and outside of the workplace. It is important to take stock of just how often they are interrupted by message alerts, what devices and platforms are helping them on tasks, and what exactly they are sharing with their coworkers on their personal social networking profiles. This can help ward off potential burnout and productivity issues *before* they emerge.
2. Managers should think carefully about a given channel's richness and ability to contribute to social presence. Specifically, we encourage organizations to avoid rich media for idea/content-focused work and to avoid plain media where intimacy between communication partners is important. The right mix of media tools is critical for performance. Related to this, managers should be patient with their virtual teams when trying out a new technology. Because of synchronicity issues and the "filtering out" of important contextual cues online, it can take time for virtual teams to bond and to develop their communication routines. If managers provide support to teams and make information easy to access for employees, it should bring out the best in their teams.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK

CATHERINE Y. KINGSLEY WESTERMAN  
AND DAVID K. WESTERMAN  
NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Relationships created and maintained at work are central to the effectiveness of organizations. Put more simply, great coworkers, supervisors, and direct reports can make an otherwise undesirable job great, whereas a terrible coworker, supervisor, or direct report can make a great job awful. As technology continues to afford new challenges and opportunities, people increasingly do not even have to leave home to “go to work,” and how we conduct relationships at work has been impacted by computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social media (sometimes known as Web 2.0) as well. This chapter will overview noteworthy elements of relationship development and maintenance at work, discuss how technology is present in those elements, and give suggestions for how to better manage relationships at work in light of changing technology.

### **Relationship development**

Most organizations are based on hierarchy, so three basic types of relationships can inform our thinking about organizations: upward, lateral, and downward. Whether the relationship partner is a supervisor (upward), a coworker (lateral) or a direct report (downward) in the organizational hierarchy determines in part how we develop and maintain a relationship with that partner. Proximity, impression management, and information seeking are significant elements of relationship development at work.

## Proximity

First, proximity in large part determines who we develop relationships with. The term proximity traditionally refers to physical closeness—that is, you are proximal to the person you sit next to at the office, to the person you see at lunch every day, and to the person you visit a few times a week to complete one of your tasks at work. Proximity is a strong predictor of interactions; being physically closer to someone increases how frequently one interacts with them, and more interactions means more potential for relationship development. So relationships at work develop with people with whom we interact frequently. Naturally, these interactions are strongly influenced by the work environment. More specifically, the physical design of organizations has an impact on how people interact at work; for example, Kupritz (2003) notes that open-plan and “bull-pen” office arrangements provide minimal gain of communication.

However, the work environment is no longer always a brick-and-mortar location. Even when there is a common workplace location, technology has increased the ability for people to telecommute. In fact, 3.9 million U.S. employees now telecommute for at least half of their job, up 115% since 2005 (Parris, 2017). Not only has technology ranging from the laptop to cloud computing enabled this shift, the shift to a knowledge economy has also created the ability to complete work from physical locations other than “work.” That is, when we are producing knowledge rather than physical products, there is no need to go to the office to complete our tasks.

But if proximity is a strong predictor of interaction, and technology allows people to work without physical proximity, how do relationships get started? Perhaps proximity may no longer only be defined as physical closeness, but as closeness developed in other ways. In 1996, Fehr asked whether “the historical emphasis on proximity as a prerequisite for the development of friendship ultimately may be revised in light of new technology” (p. 46). Given today’s major trend toward telecommuting, this question seems prophetic. The answer may lie in ideas of social presence and electronic propinquity. Social presence is “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65); an awareness of a feeling of connection with another person. Similarly, electronic propinquity is feeling close to someone through technology, or “electronic presence” (Korzenny, 1978, p. 7). Even as physically being present together diminishes, the ability to feel together can still occur using technology.

Not only does technology enable virtual work, technology available and being developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provides better affordances to facilitate social presence and electronic propinquity and thus relationship development among coworkers, supervisors, and direct reports. For example, social media such as wikis, social network services (SNS), and blogs afford visibility and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Visibility is the ability to make behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication networks visible to others in one's organization; this can provide a way of finding others with similar interests and activities as well as interacting with others who are working on similar processes or products. As part of association, Treem and Leonardi (2013) argue that social media can serve a function of supporting social connection. Social media can make connections explicit and participating helps people feel increased closeness with the organization. Social media enables easy interaction and easy affiliation among organizational members. These interactions create a proximity-via-technology, or a technology-based closeness that can contribute to relationship development.

Some relationships begin with socialization into the organization, particularly when socialization is completed collectively and physically. Because they share the experience of joining the organization, these individuals develop a bond with each other. Other than potentially bonding with their incoming cohort, most workers will mainly interact with 1) their coworkers and 2) their supervisor. In order to increase the possibilities for relationships in the workplace, reaching out to communicate with all employees is probably important but is even more important for virtual employees who may not otherwise have the normal feelings of being part of the organization. But doing so through technology can work: virtual employees reported stronger identification with their organization based on electronic communication (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1998). Technology available currently provides even better ways of making connections with employees to develop relationships.

## **Impression management**

Although proximity is a strong basis for relationship development, people are still concerned with how others view them. Employees are likely to be concerned with impression management, that is, efforts to control how they come across when interacting with others in their organization. People inherently want to be seen as competent, free to behave how they want, and as part of the group, and they can maintain these desires by carefully



controlling how they interact with other people. The desire to be seen in a certain light is particularly important when joining a new organization and meeting new coworkers, supervisors, and direct reports because these people have knowledge power that a newcomer does not yet possess. The desire to manage impressions does not necessarily go away for “old timers” in organizations, but managing impressions is particularly important for initial interactions, such as interactions with new coworkers, supervisors, or direct reports. For example, new employees may pay particular attention to how they dress and what they tell other people about themselves when they first begin a new job.

As we develop relationships, managing impressions is necessary because relationship development is based in large part on sharing personal information with others. Sharing information about oneself is known as self-disclosure; relationship development depends in part on increasing levels of self-disclosure. A challenge associated with self-disclosure and workplace relationships is managing the boundaries of personal information that may be shared with some individuals at work. Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002) suggests that people have rules about who they share information with and how that information should be managed by co-owners. These rules can be applied to both face-to-face and virtual interactions but people need to carefully manage where their information goes and how it is shared.

Newer technologies have a great potential to impact impression management based upon self-disclosures. Impression management can be impacted by differences between the actual and intended audience. People often post messages for an “imagined” audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011), but that imagined audience may or not be the actual audience of the message, helping to lead to something known as context collapse. Context collapse is defined as “the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients” (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). For example, someone might post on a social networking site about a health problem, intending for personal friends and family to see the message, but not remember or realize that people from work can see that post. This flattening of contexts can have both positive and negative outcomes. Combining distinct audiences allows for more possibilities in information gain and potential social support (to be discussed more below). However, it also means that messages meant more specifically for one audience are also potentially seen by other audiences (Vitak, Lampe, Gray, & Ellison, 2012),

such as posting that you hate your boss, but forgetting that your boss has access to that message.

The ability to manage self-disclosure and impressions can also be impacted by the timing of interactions and the degree to which one person can control when others can access information about that person. Without technology that enables people to post their “performances”—pictures, videos, and other information—it was much easier to control who would see what any person was doing at any given time. Hogan (2010) differentiated between performance spaces, where people interact and behave with each other, and exhibition spaces, where people display things about themselves to each other, without necessarily interacting. Virtual spaces have in some ways removed the difference between performance and exhibition spaces by making posted items accessible when other people want to see them, not only when you want to perform. Thus, public and permanent displays do not require others to be copresent in the same place or even at the same time, and items one posts can be interpreted without context that may have been present at the time of posting. For example, shortly after Kevin Hart was announced as the host of the 2019 Oscars, homophobic tweets he had posted in years past began to surface. The lack of context does not excuse the content of his tweets, but the current context created a much more hostile environment for those tweets than that at the time of their posting. The response led Kevin Hart to step down from the hosting gig just a few days after it was announced.

## **Information seeking**

Finally, information seeking is an important part of joining an organization. New employees inevitably experience uncertainty when they join an organization, so they need to seek information. However, information seeking incurs a social cost, and the longer an employee’s tenure at an organization, the less comfortable they feel asking questions (Miller & Jablin, 1991). For example, Joe the new guy may have an initial meeting with his supervisor to learn about all the requirements for his job, but if he later has questions about how to do parts of his job, he is more likely to ask a coworker to maintain the impression of competence with his supervisor.

Some of the impact of technology on this process include the ability to access basic information via social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). For example, an organization’s social media may include “how to” sections

where organizational members can post tips and tricks they have used; new employees can access these without incurring social cost. Another way technology impacts information-seeking is by flattening the structure of many organizations (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2008), which can allow for increased communication among members of differing levels of organizations. The traditional hierarchical structure is thus replaced with a flatter structure (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2008) that enables increased communication across what would have been different levels of hierarchy.

Regardless of the structure, the potential to make connections with others can be improved by technology, and this is useful for information flow. These connections are known as strong, weak (Granovetter, 1973), and latent (Haythornthwaite, 2002) ties. Strong ties are generally the people you are close to. People rely on these ties for many things, including support. However, Granovetter argued that weak ties, which we can generally think of as acquaintances, are also very important. Weak ties are particularly important for information seeking because your weak ties do not necessarily interact with the same people as you and your strong ties, so they can be often the sources of novel information. Technology can also increase the pool of potential latent ties, which are ties that are possible but have not been activated (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Knowing how to access and utilize these latent and weak ties is important, because it can help one get the information and expert help one may need in the workplace. For example, Constant, Sproull and Kiesler (1996) found that useful answers to work related questions came from expanding one's network through electronic channels.

## **Relationship maintenance**

Once relationships with supervisors, employees, and direct reports develop, maintenance is required to keep these relationships in a desired status. Behaviors commonly used to maintain marital relationships include positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks (Canary & Stafford, 1992), and many of these behaviors can also be used in workplace relationships. Sias and Cahill (1998) found that friendships at work developed in four stages: starting from acquaintance and moving to friend to close friend to "almost-best" friend. These transitions demonstrated a pattern of increasingly sharing more of one's personal information, moving from finding similarity with the partner to discussing problems at work, to sharing life events as the relationships became closer. Thus, maintaining relationships requires continuing proximity and providing support.

## **Continued proximity**

Continued proximity can take the form of task-related interactions or social interactions; it may occur organically or require effort to establish. As discussed earlier in the chapter, proximity seems likely to occur organically in brick-and-mortar organizations, simply because people are in physical proximity to those they are working with. Technology presents both challenges to maintaining physical proximity and affordances to maintaining proximity-via-technology. For example, it may be more difficult to maintain relationships if one or both partners are telecommuting because they will not bump into each other at the proverbial water cooler, yet the partners may interact using some form of social media or other information systems available through the organization.

Establishing continued proximity may require employees to intentionally create opportunities for interaction, whether those involve face-to-face or virtual interaction, or social versus task-related content. For virtual interactions, employees may want to borrow these rules for virtual groups suggested by Walther and Bunz (2005):

1. Get started right away
2. Communicate frequently
3. Multitask by getting organized and doing substantive work simultaneously
4. Overtly acknowledge that you read one another's messages
5. Be explicit about what you are thinking and doing
6. Set deadlines and stick to them

Many media available today afford the capability to easily accomplish some of these without much effort. For example, Slack ([slack.com](https://slack.com)) supports different channels on which different tasks can be accomplished (e.g., getting organized on one channel, doing substantive work on another). These affordances can also be used to manage social and task-related functions, either by providing a forum for discussion of both or providing a way to separate discussion of the two functions.

## **Social support**

Finally, maintaining relationships in the workplace is important because people need support at work for various reasons, such as managing conflicts, avoiding or recovering from burnout, and just getting the job

done. Already-established relationships can serve as a buffer for difficult situations that may arise. These existing relational partners can provide emotional, informational, or instrumental support. Emotional support, or letting you know that you are loved and cared for, is usually provided by coworkers or friends and family. Informational support is commonly given by coworkers or supervisors when they provide facts and advice relevant to the job. Instrumental support is commonly given by coworkers, supervisors, friends or family when they materially assist in completing work. It is important for employees to be able to access support in both social and task spheres. Even though some of the earliest theory on CMC said it would be used for task-only purposes, research (Finholt & Sproull, 1990; Steinfeld, 1990) showed that technology at work was also being used for social purposes, such as organizing social events.

Providing support to others and receiving support in return can be a vital part of success in the workplace, and technology can be very useful for receiving social support (Walther & Boyd, 2002). For example, access is one big potential advantage of online social support. Technology allows people to access support when it is needed, because it is always on, and always available. In fact, the first author of this chapter used a social media application to garner instrumental support when the second author was between meetings in a separate physical location. The combination of an existing relationship and technology can enable employees to leverage those existing relationships to gain support via technology when it would otherwise not be available.

Beyond the ability to access support, social media can afford the ability to get support from people who are most expert to give it. Media that afford visibility and association (cf., Treem & Leonardi, 2013) may assist organizational members with locating these experts. Identifying and connecting with experts might be especially important for informational and instrumental support, but the ability to overcome space and time barriers using technology can offer the possibility of getting help when and where it is needed.

## **Conclusion**

The development and maintenance of relationships at work is important to organizational functioning. Ultimately relationships among people in an organization can impact the functioning of an organization positively or negatively. How employees, managers, and organizations integrate

technology into their relationships will determine whether technology will help or hinder them. The continuing development and integration of technology affords different ways of developing and maintaining relationships (e.g., managing and working remotely), as well as presenting new challenges for organization members (e.g., controlling distribution of personal information).

## Tips

1. Intentionally create proximity to seek out and develop relationships, whether physical proximity, or proximity developed through technology.
  - a. By creating opportunity for FtF interaction.
  - b. By creating opportunity for online interaction.
  - c. Start a Slack or other communicative space.
  - d. Establish methods for seeking and sharing task-related information with others at work.
2. Be aware of the power of weak and latent ties; use technology to avail yourself of these ties.
3. Establish rules for how you will share your personal information with others at work.

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