



A guide to reducing workplace technology conflict

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Communication technology, such as email and smartphones, as well as social media, have dramatically changed the way we communicate and share information in the workplace. But what happens when issues arise?

We witness on a daily basis the numerous ways that these technologies increase workplace conflict. I will discuss the negative consequences of the increasing use of technology, including examples from our mediation work, and what we encourage clients to do in order to minimise such negative impacts.

Constantly connected

Technology allows us to communicate with immediacy and informality, in real time and with wide reach. Whilst this can be advantageous, it also has the potential to hugely increase employees' levels of stress at, and outside of, work.



In a workplace mediation setting, many of the parties we work with tell us that they feel under immense pressure at work to be available at all times. They often believe that job security and career advancement are tied into how committed they appear to be.

Another issue that we regularly come across is the over-reliance on email over face-to-face communication. In some organisations, it is normal for people who sit next to each other to send each other emails or instant messages rather than actually speaking. The excessive use of email as a communication tool is becoming more prevalent as employees hot desk or work remotely. In addition, many organisational cultures, consciously or not, promote this practice of email communication over all else.

There are a lot of problems with using email as a primary communication tool. It is easy to erroneously infer a specific negative tone from an email. People are also much more likely to write something in an email or instant message on impulse which they may later regret. Email can also create a feeling of suspicion when people think that it is being used as a tool to

document 'evidence' for a grievance or disciplinary. Importantly, communicating via email at all times doesn't build relationships in the same way that face-to-face communication does.

We have witnessed many occurrences of the 'misconstrued email' leading to unnecessary workplace conflict. One employee came to mediation with an enormous folder comprised of hundreds of print outs of email messages he had received from his manager, in date order and with highlighted sections which 'evidenced' bullying. We wondered at the time how much time and energy this employee was spending on this rather than work and family life. Another employee went on sickness leave after reading a very negative instant message about himself, which was meant for someone else. We have countless examples.

The blurring of the personal and professional

More and more of us post our thoughts, feelings and reactions to events on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. There are many benefits to being connected in this way both personally and professionally but, in our view, users need to be mindful when using such tools.

A number of mediation cases we have recently facilitated involved the use of social media and, in all of those cases, there was a blurring between the personal and professional; the 'private' becoming 'public'. In one example, work colleagues and friends who socialised together after work had a very public falling out on Facebook when one accused the other of owing money; instantly it brought a personal issue into the workplace. In another example, a manager had an argument with his PA. Prior to the argument they had had a good relationship and were 'Friends' on Facebook. The PA took to social media to post negative comments about him. The manager was hurt and their relationship deteriorated as conflict escalated.

People in conflict are already in a highly stressful situation. Often, there is no reflection on whether a post is appropriate or that their comments will become forever public. The speed, permanence and abandonment of privacy when using social media often distort how we could deal with sensitive personal situations – face-to-face in an appropriate forum.

3 ways to manage technology

There are a number of basic steps that an organisation can take to support employees to rely less on technology and more on face-to-face communication in order to prevent or reduce instances of workplace conflict.

- 1.) Face-to-face communication.** Most people like to think that they have good communication skills – in our conflict resolution training experience, they generally don't. Upskilling staff to have better communication skills is essential. This will enable them to understand why using face-to-face communication rather than overusing technology is so crucial and how to minimise the risks of using technology.
- 2.) Early intervention is the key.** Managers need to feel confident to intervene where there is the misuse of technology. Such intervention should be informal and allow all involved to speak with each other to understand how they can communicate more productively in the future.

3.) Train your managers. Managers often don't have the confidence or the skills to deal with conflict situations. Managers often fear they might do something wrong if they step in. They need to have confidence to have those difficult conversations, as should every employee in the organisation. If they don't know how to have a tricky discussion with a colleague they will be more likely to use social media to air their views as this removes the awkwardness for them of a face-to-face interaction. Conflict management - and within this mediation - needs to be recognised as a powerful tool for building trust, opening the channels of communication and creating a more harmonious work place.



Technology has revolutionised the way we work. But where speed and immediacy delivers business efficiency, this can come at the cost of good employee relations. Ensuring the appropriate use of technology, giving people the tools to have meaningful conversations and the ability to discuss difficult issues in person are, in our view, paramount to better workplaces.



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