



Improving In-Clinic Communication in a Digital World

Despite its convenience, digital communication should be given special consideration to avoid internal rifts and inefficiencies

BY CAROLYN BECKER, CVPM, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, CVT

The rise of digital communication tools has transformed the ways in which we send and receive information, the speed with which our messages are sent and our response times. The use of Slack, When-ToWork or chat apps through PIMS (practice information management systems) has become part of our daily hospital communication methods. When used appropriately, these tools improve efficiency, build connections and boost morale within veterinary hospital teams.

However, with increased usage, digital tools may make us more susceptible than ever to communication missteps. Overreliance on

digital tools can actually degrade communication within teams.

We are quick to fire off a message without a second glance. We mindlessly make a request without giving thought to how it may be perceived. We cram endless torrents of information into systems that are not designed to house it or organize it properly. Confusion ensues, or we lose the opportunity to clarify without witnessing the person's reaction to the message.

We also misinterpret what comes our way. Intentions are misunderstood, tone is misread, assumptions are made and we are left with a miscommunication mess. Left

unchecked, seemingly small missteps escalate misunderstandings.

Tools that are supposed to bring us closer can easily drive wedges, build resentment and cause feelings of alienation that ripple through the team. However, digital communication is here to stay, and with awareness we can leverage these tools to improve our interactions.

Pitfalls of Digital Tools

We have an obligation to use digital tools responsibly. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations escalate quickly, causing rifts within the team. Below are common pitfalls:

- Using tools to supplant all face-to-face communications
- Relying on digital tools to convey messages that should be openly discussed, such as giving negative feedback, expressing frustration, conveying displeasure or handling escalated disagreements
- Telling people what to do instead of exploring ideas collaboratively
- Sending lengthy messages
- Excluding people from a discussion who may be impacted by decisions
- Transmitting long documents or protocols via digital tools instead of storing them in a centralized document library
- Fracturing our attention in too many directions
- Expecting employees to check or reply to messages while not at work

Communication Styles

We each have our own natural communication style. Some people are direct, some need all the details, some place emphasis on connections and some desire to consider all angles before jumping in. Some individuals need space to share ideas and think through options, while others want results quickly.

All of these different styles must adapt to fit the constructs of digital communication mechanisms. This

Professionalism From Behind the Screen

A few tips for respectful and professional communication:

- **Be kind.** Messages should be thoughtful. Applying courtesy and manners goes a long way.
- **Be clear.** Messages should be easily understood. If they are not, create a safe space for people to feel comfortable asking questions.
- **Be concise.** If the message is paragraphs long or someone may need to refer back to it later, then another method may be better.
- **Be mindful.** Keep it above board — the use of inappropriate acronyms, emojis, etc., is a slippery slope into the muck of disrespect, or worse, can result in harassing or discriminatory comments.

sounds easy, but that isn't always the case. It's hard to fit all of these different preferences into the world of rapid-fire communication.

Start by bringing awareness to your team about different communication styles, and make sure each team member feels valued for whatever their style is. It is essential that people are willing to adapt for digital tools. Your team should consider the recipient's communication preference and then tailor their message with an appropriate level of detail, complexity and explanation to fit the situation. Whatever the communication preferences, don't miss out on the opportunity to build community among the team, both inside *and* outside the digital world.

Set Clear Expectations, Then Train

Leaders need to give teams clear guidelines on what is expected with digital communication tools. Leaders also must be willing to call people out on disrespectful communication or improper use of tools. A code of conduct, core values and other cultural initiatives must be upheld.

Training should be provided, not just for the tool itself, but on how employees are expected to effectively and properly communicate using these methods. Emphasis must be placed on the importance of utilizing

effective communication skills through the lens of digital communication. We have etiquette scripts for phone calls and emails, and we need to develop parameters for internal digital communication tools as well.

Role play good and bad messages with your team. Teach people what to do when they realize they sent an overly curt message or don't receive the response they were hoping for. It boils down to good communication skills, which, yes, need to be taught.

Develop a grievance protocol for working through misunderstandings. If someone is upset about something in the chat app, how are they to deal with it? Conflict and tension that arise via verbal communication need to be untangled, and that also applies in the digital world.

Best Practices for Digital Communication

1. Choose the best communication method for the task at hand

2. Get the right people involved in the conversation
3. Keep similar topics grouped in the right channels
4. Communicate the expected response time if asking people to brainstorm ideas
5. Give people space to ask questions
6. Handle disagreements with face-to-face discussion

Personal Development Resources

Fortunately, there are available technology resources that help teams develop effective communication skills. Everything DiSC is one such resource, which offers a powerful and personalized interactive digital platform that provides a way to better understand our own and other's communication styles. By building awareness of natural tendencies, we can adapt our approach for more effective communication and improved relationships.

Catalyst is another platform that allows team members to learn about each other's natural communication styles and receive detailed personalized tips on how to build better relationships, develop emotional intelligence and manage employees more effectively.

There are many other tools available for assessing and understanding communication and personality differences. These kinds of personalized interactive tools facilitate better communication within teams. ■

Carolyn Becker is an accomplished human resources and management consultant with over 25 years of experience in the veterinary profession. Her understanding of veterinary team dynamics is the foundation for Starpath Consulting, which provides veterinary-focused HR support, communication workshops and Everything DiSC, company culture initiatives, employee relations and performance management guidance, and more; see details at starpathconsulting.com.

