

## EPISODE 3: ARE YOUR EMAILS SABOTAGING YOU?

Hi there, and welcome to episode 3 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and I am joined behind the mic today, by Mr. John Williams. This episode is all about email and we're going to go into this a bit later, but email and other forms of communication. Now, I'm sure we've all written emails that don't get a response, or even worse, they get the wrong response which is something we didn't even intend on happening. In this episode we ask the question, are your emails sabotaging you? John, can you share the story behind this topic, why is it important?

- [JW] Yeah. I think it's important because we tend to take communication a little bit for granted. Going back a half a century or so, nearly all communication was face to face and sometimes it worked well and sometimes it didn't work so well. But in more recent years, we seem to have been blessed with a whole different range of choices. We've got telephone, we've got email, we've got texts and all sorts of other electronic forms of messaging now that give us a much richer choice of the way in which we communicate.

I worry that we can assume that they all have the same capability for communication, and I'm really concerned that they don't. And sometimes with really great intent and good forethought, the outcome that we're desiring to get can fall flat because we chose the wrong channel.

- [CC] Right, so when we talk about channels, what do you mean by that? We already mentioned email, but what other channels are you referring to?

- [JW] Okay, by way of channels, the most often used is face to face, phone and email. Often texts and these days, instant messaging systems and so on and so forth. But, other forms of communication might be via websites and broadcasting our information about our products or services maybe over a website, they're all different touch-points with a stakeholder.

- [CC] Or a podcast.

- [JW] Or a podcast, of course, yes. They are all different means of communicating with our stakeholders and they all have their own opportunities and limitations. Sometimes, we need to think through what our objective is and then choose an appropriate channel of communication rather than just pick the one that's most convenient for us.

- [CC] Okay, and we're gonna talk more about how you can actually go about doing that later on in this episode. But firstly, we're gonna talk about the different communication channels that do exist, how to use them. If listeners can do this effectively and pick the appropriate communication channel for their message and their objectives, what are the sorts of results or outcomes that they'll see from doing that?

- [JW] Good question. They're going to get greater success with their communications. Let's face it, at the end of the day, whether we think it through or not, there's an objective or an outcome that we're seeking for every piece of communication. That might be building rapport or for social reasons, it might be more focused on business in terms of understanding our stakeholder's needs or getting a sign off or agreement to different things.

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It might be about disseminating information, but whatever our objective is, we'll have far greater chance of achieving that objective if we choose an appropriate channel for that objective rather than blindly using the one that's most convenient for us at that particular moment in time.

Let me give you an example, I'm working in the office, it's 7.30 at night, I've stayed behind late, most other people have gone home, there's a number of things that are actions on my list that I really want to get off of that list and clear it. And I know that I can't contact those people after hours tonight, so you know, I might just email them. That can work.

But there's a good chance that it won't work and in my effort to get that task off my list, it may well backfire on me, I might end up with an email war or irritating the person who I'm sending that email to because I've chosen an inappropriate mechanism to get across a message that's too complex for the communication channel chose. I chose email because it was convenient to me, but it might not have been appropriate for the purpose I was trying to use it.

- [CC] I think a lot of people, I do this as well. I tend to go with email as the default form of communication because it is the most convenient one. It's what we're most used to.

- [JW] And that's usually because it's a task focus. I have this action on my list, I want to get rid of it, so I pass it on to somebody else or I try it out, sending an email and it's done and gone in five minutes. However, there's a lot of evidence that suggests that email is a very poor mechanism for communication. If you think back, 50 or a 100 years, face to face was just about the only method of communication. And there's research done by Professor Albert Mehrabian of UCLA, some years ago now, that suggests that words constitute about 7% of the communication value of a message.

When I'm face to face with you, talking as we are now, our listeners don't have this same benefit instantly, 7% of what we're getting from our communication is coming from the words alone. You're getting another 38% from the tone of voice and the change of voice as I explain what I'm trying to get across. And again, our listeners to this podcast are getting those nuances from the tone of voice. What the podcast listeners aren't getting, but what you're getting right now is another 55% that's coming from my body language.

You would have noticed I'm quite expressive with my hands, my face and everything else.

- [CC] Yes.

- [JW] In an email, we have only the words. An email is giving us at best about 7% of our total communication capability to communicate a message. It's no wonder that sometimes that messaging goes wrong, particularly when we're talking about complex things, particularly when we're talking about things that need to be interactive. Email is not a truly interactive mechanism.

- [CC] I know in your engagement skills workshop, you use an example of a sentence that's just words and you ask people to interpret that sentence. I can't remember what the sentence is, what is it again? Something about a lamb or a sheep? Mary had a lamb, wasn't it?

- [JW] There is a website, if you Google "Mary had a lamb", there is a website that comes up for that short phrase, Mary had a little lamb, it's come up with 14 or more different interpretations of those words depending on how you place the emphasis on those words. I have another phrase, "I

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never said you stole my pen.” If I put the emphasis on each of those words in turn, it changes the whole message of the--

- [CC] Hm, “I never said you stole my pen.”

- [JW] I never said you stole my pen.

- [CC] I never said you stole my pen.

- [JW] I never said you stole my pen.

- [CC] I never said you stole my pen. It’s a really fun game, everyone should play.

- [JW] That just emphasizes the difference a tone of voice can make in a communication. And of course, with an email, you might have in it emoticons, but they’re not gonna give you that same versatility and nuance that tone of voice gives you. And then, on top of that, when we’re face to face, we get the body language which really helps to clarify the message that we’re getting.

- [CC] All right. Let’s talk about how we can actually do this. We were talking before we started recording this episode and you told me how it’s so important that we need to consciously think about what we want to achieve with our message. Can you explain that to us a bit more?

- [JW] Yeah. We’ve organized a communication with somebody what are we trying to achieve here? Just take a few seconds to think what’s the outcome I’m trying to get here. Am I trying to find out some information, am I trying to build the relationship, am I trying to disseminate some information, am I trying to get an agreement to things, what is it that the purpose of this meeting is all about? If you’re trying to do most of those things, then face to face is probably the best default to go for.

It gives us the strongest chance of building a relationship, an interactive discussion, an opportunity to correct things as we interact, to clarify and to ask questions and seek agreement as required. Email, text, to a lesser extent, phone, don’t give us that same range of opportunities to do that.

- [CC] When is email or text appropriate?

- [JW] Short, simple messages is great for text. Probably overkill to try and get face to face to tell you that I’m running five minutes late for a meeting. Text is a brilliant way of saying that, or to tell you that the meeting room has changed. That’s a great way of using text. But to try and get your agreement to the next steps in the project over text is probably somewhat futile. Email is a really great confirmation tool.

If we’ve had a discussion and we’ve agreed a plan of action, then email is a great way of confirming that we’ve had that. If we’ve agreed to have a follow-up meeting in two weeks’ time, email is a great way of making sure that we’ve both confirmed to that meeting. It’s a great confirmation tool, but not a great tool for what I’d call origination. It’s not a great tool for building rapport or for understanding your key requirements within this project or for gaining your commitment for things, unless it’s something really simple.

- [CC] Sometimes I find myself writing an email and wanting to find out information, like having

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the need to ask this question and then this question, and then this question and then I realize, this is all too hard, I think I'm just gonna have to pick up the phone and call because you realize that it's just gonna go on and on, all being way too complicated or elicit far too complicated an answer which might mean that my respondent doesn't even respond 'cause it's too hard.

- [JW] The good thing about that is, A, you've realized it before you've pressed send and B, it is a great form of rehearsing your thought processes to prepare you for that interactive discussion. But sometimes, yes, it is best to call it quits and not press send, just use it as preparation. Of course, a problem with email is it's only got limited interaction. If I want to put a proposition to you, I need to describe in quite great detail, a paragraph after paragraph of a proposition I'm putting forward to you.

It may well be that whilst I'm doing that, if we had done this as an interactive discussion, you may have been able to correct an assumption I've made in the first paragraph and in an interactive discussion, it would've changed the course of the whole discussion. But because it's not truly interactive, I've now predicated the rest of the three-page email on that topic based on an error that I wasn't aware of. It can be quite time-consuming and yet fruitless to do that.

- [CC] And also if you spend less time writing email, it means you get less email back, which means that your inbox is going to be less clogged as well.

- [JW] Exactly, exactly.

- [CC] You also mentioned that it's really important to think about what other people are trying to achieve 'cause what we've done is, we consciously thought about what are we trying to achieve, we need to pick the best communication channel for that. But then when we receive a communication through a channel like text or email or a phone call, it's also, you said before, it's also really important to think about what their goals are. Can you elaborate on that?

- [JW] Exactly, yeah. Sometimes, stakeholders might send us a text or an email, giving us a one-liner that they want responded to which can be quite a complex issue.

- [CC] Like for example, would a one-liner come up and be like "What did you think of that report?" Or "How is it coming along?"

- [JW] That may well be a good example. The problem with that is we don't really know what the motive of that email or text or that one-liner is. My response to that would probably be to pick up the phone or if they're in the same building, wander around to their desk and say "I've got your text, I've got your email, let's sit down and talk it through." Because I want to understand their motivation behind that question, I want to understand what they already know or understand, I want to understand what the outcome that they're looking for is.

- [CC] I once received an email from a representative of a CEO saying, "Oh, what's your rates for a half-day and full-day coaching session?" And that was it, there was one sentence saying, "Oh, this person is interested in getting help with this, what are your rates for half-day, full-day?"

And I was like, I can't reply to these via email, I need more information and I don't even want to get that information via email, I need to call this person and ask them all these questions because

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this is so vague because my thought was, “What’s the motivation behind, why do they want half-day, full-day workshop?” Why couldn’t it be multiple two-hour sessions or something? So I needed to understand that.

- [JW] What’s the outcome they’re seeking.

- [CC] Yeah, exactly.

- [JW] Only when you understand the outcome they’re seeking can you validate that what they asked for is appropriate to be asked for. You may well be able to answer the question, but give them quite misleading information because the question they were asking wasn’t going to get them the outcome they were seeking.

In those circumstances, again, pick up the phone, pop around and see them and say, “Okay, so what is it you’re trying to achieve and let’s talk through how we can best provide a solution to that.” Rather than just give an answer that may well be a correct answer to their question, but might be quite unhelpful in getting them to where they want to be.

- [CC] It’s just being lazy, really.

- [JW] It is.

- [CC] But then, a bit more effort at the start to just pick up the phone and call or have that face to face meeting will ultimately save you a lot of time and money and stress in the end. You told me a story earlier about how a simple face to face meeting can save a whole lot of time.

- [JW] Yeah, a great example, a company in Melbourne that I deal with, they have an outsourced, or off-shored IT department that works out of the Indian subcontinent. There was a project that was awaiting a certain piece of functionality, it was quite complex functionality from the development team in India. Six weeks have gone past of conference phone calls, each time the developers assuring that they understand exactly what it was that production team required, and promising that within a week, it will all be ready and each week, they were frustrated with getting the wrong stuff.

The project leader jumped on a plane and went to Bangalore and spent two hours in a meeting with the development team and within two days he had the piece of work they needed. It short-circuited six weeks of wheel spinning for 30 people. And a constant delay on the overall project that was waiting for that piece of functionality. In some ways, it might seem absurd to spend 35 hours on an aircraft with all the costs and accommodation and flights for a two-hour meeting, but sometimes that’s what’s required.

- [CC] Oh yeah, that just shows the power of face to face communication. ‘Cause if you think about, when you’re having a teleconference or a video conference, when you’re constantly having to do with bad internet connection and delays and “Couldn’t quite hear, can you repeat that again?” That just completely, it just clouds your ability to focus on what’s happening.

- [JW] Exactly. Video conference is probably a second best to face to face, but let’s not kid ourselves it is the same as face to face. We run a course called Video Conference Ready and during that

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course, we run a number of workshops or discussion sessions within the same room and then with a different cohort of people replicate that same discussion between two conference rooms on video conference.

Doing that same discussion over a video conference usually takes about as twice as long and gets us almost similar result. Not quite as good, not quite the same quality, but it takes twice as long to get almost the same outcome when you're trying to do it over video conference.

We found that a room-sharing camera and school box or speakerphone in the middle can be quite off-putting. We tend to either speak to the people in the room in which case we talk in a conversational way, like you and I might be talking now. Or alternatively, we ignore the people in the room and we talk to the microphone as though there was nobody in the room. Either way, we are missing a part of our audience and it's very easy to switch off, if you're that part of the audience that the speaker is clearly not talking to. And that's one of the downfalls of video conference.

- [CC] I've run workshops before where we had everyone was in the room except for one person who was calling in via phone and I kept forgetting that they were there because they were just a little black speaker in the middle of a table. And people kept saying, "No, what about Sharon?!" Not a real name, but I was like, "Oh yeah, oops, sorry." 'Cause she wasn't there in front of me, I just kept forgetting she was there. I would definitely speak to the people in the room rather than focus.

- [JW] So then why do we people connected at the other end of the line, exactly. It is a limitation of that form of communication. It's probably the second best option, but there's no equivalent of face to face when it comes to rich conversation that can resolve complex problems.

- [CC] Can I just hear a quick tip from you about tele-conferencing and for people out there who do have to run a lot of meetings through tele-conferencing, what would be your number one tip for them in order to increase the level of engagement?

- [JW] I think a form of video-conferencing where everybody has their own individual connection via Skype or one of the other video-conferencing techniques, rather than being in a crowded room means that everybody has an equal access to the discussion rather than some being face to face with others and others being at the end of a communication line. I think that's probably a more productive way of running a big teleconference.

Everybody is aware of the constraints that they're getting and therefore the constraints that everybody else is getting, so we're all on a similar footing and we're all taking consideration of the fact that we're all remote. That seems to me a better approach than 15 people in one conference room talking to 12 people in another conference room.

- [CC] Okay. We've discussed so far to be aware of the objectives of your message, and then to pick the appropriate channels for it, and then to do the same with someone else and their own message, what if someone is communicating with you, a stakeholder for instance and they are using the wrong communication channel for that particular message and if they keep on using that channel that isn't appropriate, is it possible to educate our colleagues and stakeholders on appropriate methods of communication?

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- [JW] Sometimes, we need to be a bit delicate. I mean, it can come across as a little arrogant to tell people how they should be communicating, but nevertheless, I think it's important to be true to ourselves, to make sure that we can get the right solution for them.

If somebody is constantly emailing me with one liners that actually demand quite complex replies, or a greater insight to what they are trying to achieve, then I will make a point of calling them back, if I don't get through to their phone, I'll leave the voicemail message, acknowledging that I've got the request from them and that I need a bit more discussion with them about their true requirements. And hopefully, we can resolve it that way.

If they aren't prepared to get back to me, to spend the time to give me a full understanding of what they're trying to achieve, then I'm not convinced it's a good use of my time to try and guess what it is they want and risk getting it wrong for them. I'm not in the game of guessing, I prefer to be confident that I'm offering the right solution for them rather than trying to interpret.

- [CC] I actually have a friend who's a photographer, a very successful one, he specializes in photographing portraits, so he's working with people all the time. He refuses to communicate via email; it's always a phone call. And if he gets an email enquiry, he says come and meet me at my studio and he said, that's where he can provide the best customer experience for them and provide that face to face experience and that's how he's really successful with his business because of this face to face communication.

- [JW] Exactly, 'cause that's given him the chance to build a good relationship with the person that you don't tend to develop through an electronic medium like email or text.

- [CC] Yeah, it is really difficult to.

- [JW] But also, get a far deeper insight to what that person is trying to achieve. In summary, I hope what we've got across in this podcast, it's worth thinking through in a conversation, in a communication with our stakeholders. Number one, what it is we're trying to achieve, and number two, thinking through what's the best channel to achieve that. Once we work that out, then we can start preparing properly for a rich communication rather than risk things going pear-shaped.

- [CC] Fantastic. I hope you can all take away something from this and seeing as you are probably writing a bunch of emails today or tomorrow, if you're listening at night, then take this into consideration and think which of those emails might be better off communicated as a phone call or face to face meeting. Excellent, thanks so much, John, for sharing that with us today.

If you want to learn more about the workshops that John runs and also find the text version of this podcast, we'll have it created as a PDF that you can forward onto whoever else you think might benefit. You can find that in the show notes at [JHW.com.au/communicationchannels](http://JHW.com.au/communicationchannels).

And make sure you tune in for the next episode which is gonna be episode 4. We're gonna be sharing with you three powerful, yet poorly executed communication tools. You won't want to miss that one. We will see you next time, take care.