Choosing the right digital communication tool

So many great digital tools… which one should you use?

We have been given access to some new communication and collaboration tools which all have their advantages and disadvantages. How do you know which one to use in which situation? Click on one of the scenarios below to find the most suitable tool*.

I need to ask for something which has a short answer e.g. where can I find a document?, or a question with a yes/no response.

I need to brainstorm some ideas to move a piece of work / project forward.

I would like to create a poll or get multiple opinions on a particular topic.

I have a personal issue I need to speak to my line manager about.

I have created a report containing some mildly sensitive information which I need to send to a specific group of people.

I'm feeling quite lonely and isolated so it would be great to have a conversation with a team member / colleague.

I would like to set up an special interest group related to a particular topic.

I need to set-up somewhere for a project team to be able to maintain momentum and update each other inbetween meetings.

I have a formal message or piece of work I need to send to a colleague and an audit trail is really important.

I need someone senior to confirm a decision or way forward for a piece of work / project.

This focuses on digital tools and although the tools reference audio and video calls – please do not forget or underestimate the power of picking up the telephone.

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Email

The advantages

Formal
Email is a great method for sending a formal message to someone.

Audit trail
Email chains can be kept as an audit trail of a conversation and track the development of decisions. It can therefore be referenced in the future, where necessary.

Hybrid approach
Sometimes emailing and then following up with a telephone or video call to talk through the email can be an effective method. The email could be used as a guide / structure for a follow-up conversation.

Sensitivity
Email is a good option for sending mildly sensitive information as emails are sent to defined recipients, you can control who receives it. In most email clients, you can flag emails as 'private' or 'personal' – in Outlook, you do this using the properties menu.
Note: any confidential data or information should always be shared using a secure file-sharing service.
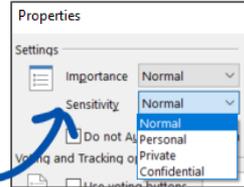
The disadvantages

Response time
Reading your email will not necessarily be on someone's list of priorities so they may not reply for a day or two!

The black hole
Some people get a huge amount of emails and unless they are very organised at flagging and categorising their incoming messages your email could get lost in the black hole of their inbox.

Lack of personality
Emails can come across as quite cold and lack personality. If it is someone you are trying to build a strong working relationship with a telephone or video call can help make it more personal.

Misunderstandings
If someone sends you an email and uses bold, underline or even worse... CAPITAL LETTERS… you can instantly think they are angry. It is also easy to misunderstand someone as, especially for non-native speakers – it can be hard to get a sense of their tone. The English language can be very ambiguous. Follow up any emails you are concerned may not have been received in the way you intended with a call (audio or video).

Did you know? …
Many email clients allow you to schedule when an email is sent. You can write it, press send and it will actually reach someone's inbox at a specific time / date you specify. This is great if you have a time specific message you want to compose in advance. Or, if you work in the evenings but do not want to bother someone outside of normal working hours (in Outlook, Properties > Delivery options).

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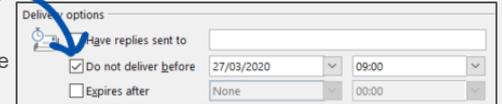
Yammer

The advantages

Community
You can reach a bigger community of people on Yammer. Plus you can build forum style groups where you can bring a community together to advise and help each other on particular areas.

Captive audience
People join the Yammer groups that interest them so they are more likely to be an engaged and interested audience.

Votes
You can very easily create multiple-choice polls on Yammer to gauge peoples thoughts on issues, topics, what they would like to see more or less of etc.

Live Q&A
Yammer can be used to run live Q&A sessions. These can be targeted and add a lot of value. Suggested approaches are drop-in style sessions with a senior member of staff or an expert in a specific area. Once the Q&A session is over, the conversation can still be continued on Yammer with new questions and answers being posted.

The disadvantages

Keeping active
Yammer is a really powerful tool in building communities and groups of people with certain interests or areas of expertise. However, you have to keep the groups active by posting regularly – this is incredibly valuable but can be time-consuming.

Moderation
As with any online forum, some degree of moderation is needed. There might be someone who is angry or unhappy about something who uses a post to vent their frustrations. Every group allows people with 'Admin' rights to be able to delete posts and remove people from groups, if necessary, plus there are also Yammer guidelines about online etiquette.

Limited reach
Not everyone will be using Yammer and while there are groups of very focusing and motivated people – there might be someone whose experience is really valuable that you would be better off reaching by email.

Did you know? …
You can praise people on Yammer for a piece of work or contribution they have made. This is an excellent way to recognise someone's achievements and has a great community feel.

Update   Question   Poll   Praise

Who do you want to praise?

Share what they've done.

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Instant messaging (via Teams)

The advantages

One-to-one and groups
You can instant message an individual (via the 'Chat' tab) or a group of people (through the 'Team' tab or through a 'Team' and then a 'Channel'). The 'Channel' chat is a good example of how you can conduct a virtual brainstorming session or keep a project team active inbetween meetings.

Speed
If you send someone a message they will get a notification and are likely to respond very quickly. Bear in mind this type of speedy response is due to the nature of closed questions or a quick shout out for information.

Oozes personality
You can use emojis to react to messages (like, heart, laugh, surprise, angry and sad), plus the library of GIFs is extensive!

Informal
Instant messaging can be used for informal chat too. If you are feeling a bit lonely, chat to a colleague on your tea break, for example, you could ask them what their plans are for the evening. If they are free, they can use the chat window to give you a quick audio or video call using the icons found in the top right-hand corner!

The disadvantages

No essays
Conversations via instant messaging are not suited to lengthy dialogue and 'essay' style messages. If you need a longer discussion – arrange an audio or video meeting.

No audit trail
If you need a record of decisions made, instant chat is not the best option. Although most messages are stored, it does not provide a reliable audit trail.

Distraction
Due to the nature of real-time communication and the expectation of quick responses, instant chat can distract you and others from regular tasks. This is why it is important to use it only for suitable scenarios.

Misunderstandings
Emojis need to be used with caution and it is important to note that certain emojis can have culturally specific meanings. It is also easy for misunderstandings to occur with text, especially for non-native speakers, as it is hard to get a sense of the sender's tone. The English language can be very ambiguous at times. Follow up any chat conversations you are concerned may have been misunderstood with a call (audio or video).

Did you know…
You can search through your messages and content in Microsoft Teams for keywords used in a conversation or a person from the University directory that you want to start a new chat with (via the search bar at the top of the screen).

Search for or type a command

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